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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
Verlag Barbara Budrich

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Waters, J. L. (2019). The transgressive potential of transnational higher education? Bringing geography back in (again). *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung / Discourse. Journal of Childhood and Adolescence Research*, 14(4), 475-483. <https://doi.org/10.3224/diskurs.v14i4.05>

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The transgressive potential of transnational higher education? Bringing geography back in (again)

Johanna L. Waters

1 Introduction

In November 2018, transnational higher education received some unexpected and highly unusual attention within the British (UK) press. Media sources brought to light the fact that Durham University doctoral student, *Matthew Hedges*, had spent six months in prison in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He was arrested and jailed whilst undertaking field-work for allegedly spying on behalf of the UK government. He has since been ‘pardoned’, has returned to the UK and denies the accusations. The case, however, all at once raised issues about transnational higher education and, significantly, brought these largely hidden ‘institutional’ developments for the first time into public purview, as the following extracts from UK media sources testify:

“Around 200 academics from New York University have called on their institution to publicly condemn the life imprisonment of the Durham PhD student accused of spying by the United Arab Emirates. In a letter addressed to NYU [New York University] president, *Andrew Hamilton*, the academics said the university, which has a campus in Abu Dhabi, should use its ties with the UAE government to press for the release of Matthew Hedges, whose detention they describe as unjustified and “tantamount to torture”. The academics said the university’s president, *Andrew Hamilton*, should tell the Gulf state that *Hedges*’ imprisonment has “grave implications for NYU’s ongoing operation in Abu Dhabi”, which has been dogged by controversy over migrant labour abuses and restrictions to academic freedom. They also called for the university to re-assess its ties with the UAE government, which financially supports the Abu Dhabi campus.” (*Batty/Hall* 2018 – in *The Guardian*).

“Staff at the University of Birmingham have voted for an academic boycott of its campus in the United Arab Emirates as fears grow for the rights and safety of academics and students following the life sentence given to a Durham PhD student accused of spying in the UAE. The motion passed on Thursday means lecturers based in Birmingham will refuse to teach in Dubai and will not provide the campus with any academic support, such as course materials and marking exams. *James Brackley*, the president of the Birmingham branch of the University and College Union (UCU), said: “We call on the university to enter into meaningful negotiations with the trade unions to ensure they protect the safety and wellbeing of staff and students on the Dubai campus. “We also call on them to hold back on the expansion of the campus until safeguards are in place.” *Brackley* said Birmingham University had repeatedly ignored concerns raised about the watering down of LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Trans-sexual] rights on the Dubai campus, academic freedom and the UAE’s poor track record of migrant labour abuses.” (*Batty* 2018 – in *The Guardian*, n.p.)

In addition to government led, diplomatic channels, UK and US universities were being asked to *intervene directly* in the case. New York University, for example, was called upon to put political pressure on the UAE government to release Hedges, because of its university presence there. Likewise, University of Birmingham academic staff, in the UK, opted to boycott teaching on its UAE campus following the student's arrest and until his release. As the quotations taken from media reports (above) attest, this specific case sparked the voicing of wider concerns about the UAE's dealing with LGBT rights on Dubai campuses, the restriction of academic freedoms and a 'poor track record of migrant labor abuses' (Batty 2018). Suddenly, such assumed universalities as 'rights' and 'freedoms' were called into question. As Arendt (1951) wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 'human rights' exist only in relation to the existence of a state apparatus to uphold those rights. All of which leads to the question of the portability of rights and freedoms in and through TNE; whether they *are* portable, whether they *should be* portable, and why this lack of attention to geographical differentiation (paid by practionners and reproduced in policy reports) has persisted. A case such as this exposes the myth of a borderless, boundaryless global educational landscape and reminds us that education systems are deeply embedded in national and regional structures, inflected by strongly held beliefs.

This paper considers the assumed 'universality' – and denial of geography – that has accompanied discourses and assumptions, to this point, about transnational education, particularly (but not solely) in policy discussions. It forces a return to some of the questions posed by Mitchell (1997) more than two decades ago in the context of increasingly decontextualised and abstract debates around theories of 'transnationalism'. As Mitchell (1997) then noted, 'borders are normally associated with power relations' and movement across borders has 'flavor of the elicit' (p. 101). However, as has been noted elsewhere (Leung/Waters 2017), borders in relation to TNE in fact denote various power geometries (after Massey 2004), wherein people are differentially placed in relation to (the benefits of) globalisation and capital accumulation. Borders are alive and well in TNE – arguably, TNE is producing new and emergent borders, which have yet to be mapped, intellectually (Sparke 2016). This paper proffers a conceptual argument regarding the neglect of the geographies of TNE and some of the implications of this. This links to larger questions about geopolitics, the geosocial, 'ethics' and 'responsibility' with respect to TNE. The paper comes out of work that I have co-produced specifically on UK transnational education (Waters/Leung 2013a, 2013b, 2017).

2 Defining transnational education

TNE is often discussed (in the context of the UK) as a multi-million pound global industry (BIS 2014) and broadly represents the export of educational services. A more specific and conventional definition of TNE describes formal academic programmes 'in which learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based' (McBurnie/Ziguras 2006, p. 21). Transnational higher education is also sometimes known as cross-border education (Healey/Bordogna 2014). TNE is hugely significant to the UK economy and to UK higher education (HE). Yet, it remains largely hidden from public purview, and rarely discussed in discourses around HE. And even within universities themselves, TNE is often separated off from the general workings of the university,

with most staff and students unlikely ever to be aware of the extent their institution's involvement in overseas education (TNE students are excluded from annual national student evaluations, for example). Reports produced by Universities UK and Global HE provide the following helpful context about the extent to which UK higher education institutions are involved in TNE, globally (Figure 1).

- There are only 15 countries where UK does not offer any TNE.
- International enrolment in UK was flat between 2013/14 and 2014/15. In contrast, enrolment in TNE delivered by UK HEIs grew by 13% over the same period.
- 4 out of 5 British institutions intend to expand their TNE over next 3 years.
- Expansion of TNE marked by increasing flexibility in terms of mode of delivery, and also by a greater emphasis on collaborations with local partners.
- The most popular subjects are business and management (40%) followed by medicine and related studies, then arts & humanities.

Figure 1: Summary highlights of UK TNE (HE Global Report 2016)

Healey (2015, p. 386) argues that the growth of international branch campuses has been 'one of the most striking developments in the internationalisation of higher education' over the past decade. The UK government committed to increasing education exports from £18 billion in 2012 to £30 billion by 2020 (*Jo Johnson*, former UK Minister of State for Universities & Science) and so sees this as an important (economic) growth area. Whilst most policy related interpretations of TNE are 'financial' in nature, the British Council (the public body in charge of promoting UK education around the world and facilitating transnational exchanges) has a more ambiguous approach. According to the British Council, TNE has the potential to 'rebalanc[e] the global higher education market, allowing more students to study in their own countries and reducing the costs to developing countries in terms of foreign exchange and 'brain drain'. It can build capacity both at home and overseas, a key driver for universities offering TNE and partners and countries hosting TNE alike' (*HE Global – British Council and Universities UK*, 2016, p. 9). The notion of 'rebalancing' is an interesting one. It seems to represent a tacit admission that the current global HE market is highly uneven, unbalanced and potentially exploitative, geared towards universities in the West making money off the back of an ongoing post-colonial valorisation of Western forms of knowledge and the ascendancy of English as a global language. And yet, it is unlikely that this 'potential' will be realised until and unless the complex geographies of TNE are grasped.

3 TNE and the importance of geography

'It noted that a number of IBCs [international branch campuses] have failed and that this can damage universities financially and reputationally. There is clearly a need for senior university managers to be better informed about the challenges of establishing and managing IBCs, which are often set up in countries with very different cultures and legislative environments' (*Healey* 2015, p. 401).

There is a small but growing 'critical' academic literature on international higher education (of which TNE is a sub-set), exposing the various inequalities inherent in the process (e.g. *Waters* 2006; *Madge* et al. 2009, 2012; *Wilkins* 2017; *Tannock* 2013; *Liu-Farrer/Tran*

2019; Lomer et al, 2018; Lomer 2014). Some of this work has focused on inequalities in relation to class, wealth and access to capital (Waters 2006) and the problem of framing students as ‘consumers’ (Lomer 2014); others on the ways in which international education is prone to neglect post-colonial responsibilities (Madge et al. 2009). This literature considers international education in a broader sense, to encompass international student mobility rather than focusing on transnational education *per se*. Indeed, TNE has generally been sorely neglected in these critical discussions of international higher education. Here, however, I want to focus specifically on TNE, and consider what the concept of ‘transnationalism’ means (if anything) in relation to TNE.

The origins of the term ‘transnationalism’, as used within the social sciences, lie in the corporate strategies of large capitalist firms (transnational corporations) and only later (in the mid-1990s) came to be applied to understanding the behaviour of people (Basch et al. 1994; Rouse 1995). It became, in the 1990s, an ostensibly transgressive and highly progressive term when used to understand international migration, eschewing methodological nationalism in favour of the perspectives of migrants themselves and foregrounding their experiences (often of exploitation). To be transgressive, however, it needed to assert the geographies underpinning these processes – such were the arguments of Katharyne Mitchell over 20 years ago when she opined, *inter alia*, that geography needs to be brought ‘back in’ to contemporary debates around the topic.

It is my contention that whereas debates around transnationalism within geography and the social sciences more broadly have progressed and changed significantly since the mid-1990s, the use of ‘transnational’ in relation to TNE is, conversely, reminiscent of these decades-old discussions. Many of the issues highlighted by Mitchell in 1997 (indicating ‘problems’ with this discourse) can be applied to TNE today. Consequently, there persists an epistemological shortsightedness and an inability to comprehend the broader (global and yet always locally inflected) significance of TNE, as seen in the kinds of issues raised in the opening to this paper (around transfer, amongst other things, of ‘ethics’ and cosmopolitan sensibilities).

As Mitchell noted in 1997, a great deal of work on transnationalism focused on ‘economic globalization’ – ‘particularly the growing international flows of commodities, services, money and information’ (p. 102). This is how TNE is widely discussed – in terms of the General Agreement on Trade in Services and increased global trade in education (Wilkins 2017). Neoliberal agendas, pursued by individual nation states, have facilitated and, indeed, created a climate in which higher education can be sold, internationally, as a commodity. These discussions often present globalization as a ‘homogenous’ process. This can be seen in conversations around the convergence of education policy, globally, as described by Rizvi and Lingard (2010, p. 3):

‘Public policies were once exclusively developed within a national setting but are now also located within a global ‘system’. While national governments continue to have the ultimate authority to develop their own policies, the nature of this authority is no longer the same, affected significantly by imperatives of the global economy, shifts in global political relations and changing patterns of global communication that are transforming people’s sense of identity and belonging... These shifts have inevitably affected education policy. With the rejection of the ideas associated with the Keynesian welfare state, governments have increasingly preached a minimalist role for the state in education, with a greater reliance on market mechanisms.... This has led to an almost universal shift from social democratic to neoliberal orientations in thinking about educational purposes and governance, resulting in policies of corporatization, privatization and commercialization on the one hand, and

...a greater demand for accountability on the other (*Lipman* 2004). At the same time, educational purposes have been redefined in terms of a narrower set of concerns about human capital development, and the role education must play to meet the needs of the global economy and to ensure the competitiveness of the national economy.'

Higher education (and academia) has changed, over the past century, characterized by entrepreneurship and the diversification of funding sources (*Slaughter/Leslie* 1997). Discussions of changes in higher education are often inseparable from discussions of the globalization of markets (characterized by *Slaughter and Leslie's* coining of the term 'academic capitalism'). Just as conversations about globalization in the 1980s and early 1990s were marked by an assumption towards homogeneity, so too have more recent discourses surrounding TNE – supposing that education can be 'exported' unproblematically, that curricula and ideas 'travel', and that local, localised cultures will have minimal impact on the teaching and learning experience. For example, if we consider only international branch campuses, the UAE, China and Singapore are the 'main locations' globally, with the Middle East accounting for 22% of all of these (*Healey* 2015). Taking into account these countries' cultural distinctiveness when setting up and running a branch campus would seem to be a crucial step and yet runs counter to hegemonic narratives of a 'globalised' form of education represented by TNE.

However, the case of the overseas campuses, described in the introduction above (raising issues around workers' rights, freedom of speech and LGBT rights), forces us to confront an enduring ethno-centrism and Westernization underpinning 'globalization' narratives around education (*Jazeel/McFarlane* 2009). International education is not about the unproblematic transference of skills, knowledge and understanding. Education operates in specific cultural and social contexts and, on the ground, the failure of many overseas campus operations (many are closed down a few years after beginning) is testimony to the importance of geographical difference.

Healey (2015) indicates, in part, where the problem lies: in an inability to analyse, with any theoretical insight, the geographies of TNE. As he notes, the vast majority of 'research' to date on TNE amounts to so-called 'grey literature' – in other words, research conducted on behalf of organisations such as the Quality Assurance Agency, the British Council, the Observatory for Borderless Higher Education, the UK Higher Education Unit and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Because this literature is produced for practitioners and not for an academic audience and is also, habitually, only available to those paying a fee, a coherent intellectual narrative on TNE is unable to develop. *Healey* (2015) also makes the excellent point that the commercial sensitivity of most TNE ventures means that it is very difficult (if not impossible) for academics to gain access to them in order to research them 'from the inside'. The answer to the question, then, of 'how do we bring geography back into discussions of TNE?' is, in my view, two-fold. One, there needs to be more critical, intellectual investigations of TNE – and ideally these discussions would inform policy. And two, 'provider' institutions themselves need to be asking these questions about ethics, responsibility and geography. The answer might still be 'yes' to the setting up of a branch campus or franchised degree programme, but in asking the questions a more student-centered and responsible TNE provision will inevitably emerge.

4 Progressive/transgressive potential of TNE?

The second step in my argument is to consider the progressive and/or transgressive potential of TNE: the extent to which it can *create geographies*, ‘breaking down borders’ (politically, socially and culturally) in the process. In doing so, I attempt to incite the ‘transnational’ in transnational education – to ask how it might ‘herald the ways in which new cross-border movements have facilitated the production and reworking of multiple identities, dialogic communications and syncretic cultural forms’ (Mitchell 1997, p. 108). Just as TNE might be seen to reinforce and reproduce ‘essentialising narratives’ associated with a Western-centric view of knowledge production and transfer, might it also exhibit the potential to contest these same narratives? As argued by Madge et al (2014, p. 692), the ‘multi-sited, multi-scalar character of international study challenges simplistic dichotomies of here/there and unsettles the spatial imagination away from thinking about ‘the international’ and about pedagogy solely in relation to (largely unmarked) European-American-Australian centres, and instead explicitly locates itself as coming out of, and to, multiple locations.’ I would preface this statement with ‘potentially’ – this potentiality is critical.

In the introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha describes as ‘politically crucial’:

‘the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovate sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself’ (pp. 1f.).

For Bhabha, political progressiveness is about moving beyond nationness. With its historical (and ongoing) ties to the nation and nation-building, education is a terrain where such contestations might be played out. TNE can/could force us to be aware of the geographies underpinning international education: to challenge local norms; to effect change; and also to learn from the local environment, and to instill the co-production of knowledge as well as the production of new spaces, in the way that Massey (2004) imagines space:

‘If space is a product of practices, trajectories, interrelations, if we make space through interactions at all levels, from the (so-called) local to the (so called) global, then those spatial identities such as places, regions, nations, and the local and the global, must be forged in this relational way too, as internally complex, essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing’ (p. X).

TNE has the potential to render new ideas of space – the way in which it represents flows and connections far more than bounded territory or ‘national’ ideas. It can push against the persistent tendency ‘that posits local place as the seat of genuine meaning and global space as in consequence without meaning, as the abstract outside.’ (Massey 2004, p. X). It brings the ‘global’ into the ‘local’, and vice versa.

In order to achieve this, UK universities must eschew discourses ‘that seek to present the internationalization of UKHE as a ‘neutral experience’ within normalizing conceptions of internationalization’...instead highlighting ‘the connections between the geographical, historical, political, economic and cultural spheres in order for an ‘engaged pedagogy’ to emerge’ (Madge et al. 2009, p. 35). These are the connections that Massey

intends to highlight and TNE exemplifies such connections as it *cannot be located* in any simple sense (of ‘absolute’ space). This brings us inevitably to the concern with ethics and responsibility underpinning Massey’s work – universities have an ethical responsibility to engage with the implications of their TNE endeavors; to recognise that they are not happening ‘out there’ (to face-less, name-less students) but they are deeply implicated in them and with *their* students. As we have argued elsewhere, a lack of care for transnational students (who often remain ‘out of sight, out of mind’) by the ‘home’ institution has characterised much TNE (Waters 2018).

5 Conclusions

This paper has revisited the arguments made by *Mitchell* (1997) several decades ago in relation to academic discourses around transnationalism and the danger of applying universalising ideas to globalisation. It has been argued that whilst intellectual debates around transnationalism (in relation to population migration) have moved on, significantly, since this time, discussions of transnational education reveal a use of the term that assumes a universality and homogeneity of policy and practice around higher education (again, the influence of ‘globalisation’ is writ large). The error of ignoring geography was brought into sharp relief in the recent case of *Matthew Hedges*, discussed in the introduction, where his arrest for ‘spying’ during his doctoral research sparked calls for universities (particularly those in the UK and US) to intervene in diplomatic processes, by virtue of the fact that they had transnational education ventures in the UAE.

The paper’s aim has been quite simple in many respects, and that is to render the *geography* of TNE more apparent. That is to say, researchers (and practitioners) involved with TNE need to be far more cognizant of geographical difference and the implications of those differences. Rather than being ignored or ‘swept under the carpet’, it is argued that these differences need to be openly acknowledged and debated. The paper also had a second goal, related to the claims by *Madge et al.* (2014) about the ‘multi-sited, multi-scalar character of international study’ and its potential to *challenge* ‘simplistic dichotomies of here/there’ (*Madge et al.* 2014, p. 692). The ‘multi-ness’ that characterises TNE is fascinating and in fact unable to be contained in the way that ‘national’ education is assumed to be containable. Precisely because it involves multiple partners working in multiple sites with multifaceted ideas around education and society, it has a dynamic that is exciting and potentially disruptive of established ways of thinking (including knowledge produced in neo-colonial ways by European-American-Australian centres). However, that potential is not, I would argue, being currently met. Whilst TNE continues widely to be conceptualised through a lens of economics (specifically, revenue generated), the ethical and progressive possibilities will fail to be realised. This is not out of line with higher education more broadly – in the UK, HE is under enormous pressures to generate funding through student fees and grant income, maximize revenues and cut staff pensions. This pressure is often at odds with how academics perceive their jobs and the role of the university more broadly – to generate and disseminate knowledge about the world and to act as a force for good. These broader debates about HE should not (but generally do) exclude TNE – TNE (in some form or other) is integral to universities’ strategic plans, and yet discussions about ‘the university’ ‘at home’ almost never factor in its overseas ven-

tures and, essentially, its overseas students. To conclude, rather than ignore TNE, TNE *and its geographies* need to be brought out into the open and embraced by the ‘provider’ university, its staff and student body. That way, the problems may be exposed, yes, but so too might its progressive potential be realised.

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