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Researching the transnational higher education policy landscape: Exploring network power and dissensus in a globalizing system

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This article reviews research on transnational higher education (TNHE) published in academic journals between 2006 and 2014 through the lenses of network power and dissensus. Conclusions suggest the need for more research on the 'entrapping' aspects of global social relations to provide a counterweight to the influence of dominant paradigms. It is argued that research at local-institutional level, harnessing the dissensus of the academic community with the needs and aspirations of students, provides the means to develop global imaginaries and initiate new policy directions that break free of entrapment and address the perverse outcomes of globalized knowledge-based economy models in higher education (HE).

Keywords: transnational higher education; globalization; knowledge-based economy; network power; dissensus; quality assurance; social mobility; Asia

Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE) is perhaps the most visible manifestation of the globalization, trade liberalization, and commodification of higher education (HE) in a borderless market fuelled by huge increases in worldwide demand. In recent years TNHE has expanded exponentially. In the academic year 2007/8 there were 196,670 students studying UK programmes in their home countries. By 2012/13, the total number of TNHE students had increased to 598,485 (an almost three-fold rise) (HESA, cited in Caruana and Montgomery, 2015).

The UK, a world leader in TNHE, provides an example of how internationalization policy formation, initially focused in the 1990s on the generation of foreign currency from recruitment of international students, has shifted towards the transnational dimension of internationalization that prioritizes reputation and brand recognition in overseas markets and the global projection of the UK's 'soft power' (Caruana and Montgomery, 2015). Considering the Council of Europe's call in 2002 for national HE systems to preserve cultural, social, philosophical, and religious diversity, while promoting international and global cooperation between HE systems and institutions, guided by 'ethical principles and values', TNHE potentially renders HE systems not only sites of competition, but also incongruence, contestation, and struggle.

This article attempts to understand the evolution of the TNHE policy landscape through the lenses of network power and dissensus. Network power refers to the systemic force of the standards by which a network functions, the shared norms or practices that unite the network in mutual recognition and enable members to gain access to each other, to cooperate and engage in the exchange of ideas (Grewal, 2003; King, 2010). It may be regarded as the dynamic driving global convergence in the absence of coercion or conditionality. In global networks individual policy

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decisions are made in the context of decisions taken by other autonomous states, and what others adopt constrains individual choice. As global standards, models, practices, and policies spread, so their influence grows through increased worldwide experience and knowledge, which itself encourages further worldwide adoption. As the network standard becomes more compelling than agency autonomy for non-adopters, they begin to confront increasing social, cultural, economic, and political pressure to conform in an environment where ‘following the crowd begins to feel safe’. In turn, the pressure to conform increases network power through wider adoption and the progressive elimination of alternatives (Grewal, 2003; Grewal, 2008; King, 2010; Tadaki and Tremewan, 2013).

Dissensus provides a framework to explore how agency in networks and discourse communities are supporting – through consensus, prescriptive, non-critical, normalizing neo-liberal discourse and reinforcing network power – or disrupting – scrutinizing the ‘standards’, ‘rules of the game’ according to broader ethical principles, challenging network power – dominant TNHE discourses. Dissensus refers to processes of resistance, contestation, and thorough examination and confrontation of imaginable alternatives that can change the concepts and policy stances within networks and discourse communities. Dissensus denotes a view held by a significant minority that is counter to a view felt to be held weakly, illogically, or irrationally by the majority as a result of ‘groupthink’ or ‘brainwashing’. Newcomers who want to be accepted as part of the social group are equally susceptible to groupthink as existing members, and consensus can emerge as an end in itself rather than as a means to facilitate decision-making. However, the outcome of deliberations can be a false, simulated consensus based on common identification rather than *real* consensus. As dissensus is quashed, alternative options are closed off reinforcing the status quo, which becomes a familiar place of comfort even as it becomes more untenable. In contrast, dissensus acknowledges a struggle that shifts rhetorical analysis from persuasion or common identification to an antagonistic framework of conflict and difference that disrupts global knowledge hierarchies embedded in hierarchical relations of power, thereby achieving *real* consensus (Greer, 2009; Myers, 1986; Trimbur, 1989; Zavattaro, 2011).

Network power and dissensus provide the lenses through which the emerging shape of the TNHE policy landscape can be understood and allow the location of counter-narratives that may be challenging current policy trends in the field. This article is structured around the three levels of embeddedness in which change in university systems takes place – global, national, and local-organizational, which may be likened to ‘tectonic plates’ offering seemingly endless possibilities for reinterpretation (Hall, 2011: 1).

Methodology

This article draws on a prior systematic review of literature that focused on developing an in-depth understanding of the interrelationship of the multiple social, cultural, and political contexts and structures within which TNHE is playing out (Caruana and Montgomery, 2015). An extensive electronic search using higher education platforms generated a Zotero library of 250 articles published in academic journals dating from 2006, a cut-off date that acknowledges a key question posed by Caruana and Spurling (2007): ‘The future shape of institutional internationalization – Transnational Higher Education?’ This library was searched for journal articles concerned with policy formation and implementation at the three levels of embeddedness in which change in university systems takes place. At the global and national levels, pieces tended to suggest policy perspectives in their titles. However, at the local-organizational level where a small but growing literature explores institutional, academic staff, and student perspectives on transnational teaching and learning, the focus on policy formation was maintained by trawling abstracts to identify

those contributions that commented on the broader macro implications of policy formation and implementation and/or policy outcomes in local/institutional contexts.

The articles emerging from this selection process (in excess of fifty) were subjected to detailed analysis and synthesis based on the principles of narrative review that embrace self-knowledge and acknowledge shared educational phenomena (Jones, 2004), applying the theoretical lenses of network power and dissensus. The analysis assumed two distinct but related perspectives. Firstly, the focus was on the extent to which these concepts may explain the substance of what academic research has to say about the shape and direction of policy. Secondly, the review considered the academic community as a discourse community itself shaping policy perspectives and providing a potentially dissenting voice.

The exclusion of official policy documents published by organizations prominent in setting the international agenda, for example the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is deliberate since the purpose of the analysis is to determine the extent of network power attached to the global standards that emerge from such policy discourse communities and the degree of dissensus encountered as the standards permeate the nation state and local/institutional levels of embeddedness.

Findings from the literature review

Globalization, internationalization, and knowledge-economy discourse in transnational settings

Up to the 1980s, internationalization of HE was dominated by notions of technical assistance to 'Third World' countries and the quasi-charitable notion of helping students from less developed HE systems. The rise of globalization and the neo-liberal revolution in policymaking since the 1990s has promoted the view of universities as critical players in securing economic prosperity in the globalized knowledge-based economy (Edwards *et al.*, 2010; Huang, 2007; King, 2010).

Within this explicitly economic model involving the commodification of knowledge, which blurs the lines between education as social capital and education as human capital, TNHE is both the product and the instrument of globalization. As universities become service providers seeking to gain from the opportunities available outside their domestic markets, TNHE signifies the most significant manifestation of an approach to education based on commercialization and entrepreneurialism, challenging any notion of education as a public good (Edwards *et al.*, 2010; Huang, 2007; Shams and Huisman, 2012).

It has been argued that TNHE has little to do with increasing international and intercultural cooperation and understanding. Reductions in state funding of HE serve to reinforce the emphasis on increasing the global market share of students and research markets, formulating new investment strategies such as international branch campuses and developing alternative sources of revenue through the exploitation of the opportunities offered by TNHE (Kauppinen, 2012; Kauppinen, 2015; Kim, 2009; Stella, 2006; Wilkins and Huisman, 2012; Zwanikken *et al.*, 2013).

Some scholars seeking to understand the complex relationship between TNHE and globalization argue that its transnational circuits, networks, and practices cannot be reduced to attempts to secure and diversify external sources of funding along the lines of the academic capitalist regime. Rather, TNHE is better understood as a form of transnational academic capitalism wherein occupied positions in transnational structures are more important than the interactions between individual and collective actors in enabling or restricting participation. Researchers also maintain that key strategic positions in global structures have been taken up by a transnational

capitalist class of ‘overseas educated locals’. Through their peculiar and situated experiences of education, these individuals have developed ‘an extraordinary concentration of symbolic capital’, which creates a ‘genuine common culture’ providing the foundation for a common, but exclusive and elite, group identity bound by mutual recognition (Kauppinen, 2012; Kauppinen, 2015; Waters, 2007). Transnational academic capitalism and the emergence and influence of a transnational capitalist class seem to imply both the existence of network power and a relative absence of dissensus in the TNHE policymaking field. In the theory of transnational academic capitalism, structures are more important than agency autonomy and if the transnational capitalist class represent the agents – to the exclusion of other class interests – then groupthink is likely to be a powerful influence in transnational policymaking.

Nonetheless, a significant proportion of the literature on TNHE policy engages in the ‘profits versus quality debate’ in an environment dominated by league-table rankings and ‘brand image’. Despite extensive efforts to secure quality provision on a global scale, perceptions of the quality gap between developing and developed worlds persist in a game of ‘catch-up’ in international rankings where, as one nation moves up the league, perceptions are that others have also ‘upped their game’, so the gap is at least sustained if not increased over time. The emergence of a preoccupation with quality standards and assurance in the context of global league tables suggests that while the commodification of education enables trade structures to dominate, there is evidence of dissenting voices arguing the case for students’ right to a ‘whole-person education’ – education as a public good rather than a private commodity (Cheung, 2006; Hill *et al.*, 2014; Leung and Waters, 2013; Sidhu, 2009a; Tadaki and Tremewan, 2013).

The influence of international organizations in transnational settings

In the 1980s, international cooperative projects in higher education sought to build cultural bridges through promoting mutual engagement and equal participation in the hope of reducing the global development gap. Since 1995 HE has fallen under the framework of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the first treaty of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to deal with trade in services rather than products. Within the framework of the WTO and GATS, TNHE is a commodity to increase the global trade in educational services. The objective of the WTO is to assist free trade by the elimination of trade barriers, but it also coordinates what kind of trade and trade-related policy measures are appropriate in gaining access to the world’s major economies. As more and more countries have joined WTO and signed up to GATS, so the influence of shared standards in trade has increased, gaining network power as structure crowds out agency autonomy in determining and managing individual expectations (Grewal, 2003; King, 2010, Pinna, 2009; Zwanikken *et al.*, 2013). While trade is a dominant influence in global TNHE policymaking, UNESCO (the General Council of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization) constitutes a consensually operating discourse community that offers the prospect of a countervailing influence. However, the literature suggests that the prospect has failed to become a reality as existing inequalities are reinforced in an environment subjected to ever-extending waves of globalization (Pinna, 2009).

Early concerns about the commercialization of HE were met in 2005 by UNESCO’s publication of practices and principles to regulate the cross-border provision of HE. The guidelines argue the case for importer countries to adopt ‘gate-keeping’ procedures to secure quality and for exporter countries to develop their own external quality assurance systems (Blackmur, 2007; Cheung, 2006; Smith, 2010; Shams and Huisman, 2012; Zwanikken *et al.*, 2013). However, UNESCO’s response has been viewed as a ‘regulate first and ask questions later’ approach to public policy. The authors have been accused of being in opposition to liberalization,

anti-GATS, and ideologically opposed to a 'student as consumer' philosophy. Furthermore, the principle of sharing good practice as a means of securing quality is challenged on the grounds that good practice is an important part of intellectual capital that provides a source of competitive advantage in the scramble for ascendancy in the global marketplace. UNESCO's guidelines are also criticized for encouraging approaches to educational quality formation in TNHE that promote educational imperialism through reliance on the home programme as the single measure of quality, which effectively transfers or reproduces the values, understandings, and methods of the home culture. Critics refer to the limitations of the espoused 'coordinated response' to quality issues in the form of 'benchmarking' exercises that promote 'sameness of quality' rather than quality assurance, thereby 'exorcis[ing] the influence of local tradition' (Blackmur, 2007; Cheung, 2006; Leung and Waters, 2013; Pyvis, 2011; Stella, 2006; Shams and Huisman, 2012; Zwanikken *et al.*, 2013).

The predominant influence of trade structures over education in TNHE policymaking reflects network power. Clearly there is dissensus within the academic community concerning UNESCO's role in determining policy priorities and directions and its relative impotence when confronted with the power of the trade imperative. Stella (2006) articulates the dilemma very succinctly in noting that quality assurance has little impact on WTO negotiations and that education is not a driver for trade in education services negotiations. He also cites the dialogical gap between education groups and trade groups in other global policymaking arenas such as the OECD.

Transnationalization, policy convergence, and network power – A nation state perspective

The growth of transnational higher education and policy perspectives on the Asian continent – A case of selective adoption?

Asia has undergone significant expansion of TNHE, particularly since the 1990s, as a result of globalization and the influence of the Asia financial crisis of 1997. Key players include China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, although Indonesia has also undergone a lesser degree of expansion. Much of the literature explores TNHE policymaking in this geographical context. Theoretically the nation state is a medial institution, simultaneously the actor and the target of transnational pronouncements and seeking to find equilibrium in the face of potentially competing global and domestic pressures. The literature shows, however, that in practice education policy dominated by the pursuit of economic growth and development and enhanced global competitiveness has led to common measures designed to increase participation in national HE systems. The worldwide increase in demand for HE reflects a common drive to build capacity and expand enrolments to address skills shortages in labour markets. Attracting students with talent, expertise, and prestige while improving the global competence of university graduates to accelerate the process of building human capital emerges as a key priority. The predominant perception is that state finance cannot satisfy this burgeoning demand, therefore attempts to increase supply follow a process of trade liberalization, deregulation and pro-competition policy instruments. Concurrently nation states are developing export strategies to capitalize on the opportunities afforded by rising demand and trade liberalization, thus constituting TNHE not only as a contributor towards capacity building, but also as an important source of revenue for governments (Gift *et al.*, 2006; Huang, 2007; Mok, 2008; Saarinen, 2008; Waters and Leung, 2014; Wilkins and Huisman, 2012; Yang, 2008).

As a new 'Asia knowledge space' has opened up in an attempt to enable national economies to move towards knowledge-related production, state-centred and nationally organized systems of HE have given way to pluri-scalar and pluri-institutional models of governance. Regulatory regimes are being reinvented to govern the growing complexity and often highly contested public-private mix. It is argued that state-market relations in Asia challenge binary models of 'economic socialism' and 'economic liberalism' as hybrids emerge. China has been characterized as a 'state-guided market' maintaining state-orientated regulation; Singapore as a 'market-accelerationist' that nevertheless maintains a significant role in proactively orchestrating TNHE to meet national needs; Malaysia is described as assuming an 'authoritarian-liberalist' stance embodying much state direction, but aspiring to a 'market accelerationist state' in the longer term; and Hong Kong stands out as the 'market-facilitating state' wholly committed to liberal market economy. On this basis, some of the literature argues that HE reform has involved the selective adoption of neo-liberalism in the face of an 'irresistible' trend of globalization fuelled by inclusion in WTO and GATS (Mok, 2008; Mok and Xu, 2008; Waters and Leung, 2014).

However, exploring research that discusses policy in the context of individual nation states, reveals the full extent to which common policy perspectives with relatively limited variation have emerged. While their national strategies to boost knowledge-based economy status make Asian countries profitable markets for exporters elsewhere, HE sectors within Asia are increasingly assuming dual importer-exporter status. For example, China's accession to the WTO in 2001, and its inclusion in GATS, accelerated pressure to open up the market to Western universities. While China remains a major importer of Western degree programmes, an export market has also developed as other countries in the region, such as South Korea, Japan, Pakistan, Thailand, Nepal, and Vietnam, look to the Chinese HE system to prepare professionals for work in multinational corporations or international commerce. Similarly, for Singapore and Malaysia the development of an education export industry is strategically significant in attempts to move up the value-chain to become knowledge-based economies. Indeed, both nations have declared their intention to become 'educational regional hubs' in the South East Pacific region (Bolton and Nie, 2010; Feng, 2013; Yang, 2008).

Singapore provides an interesting case of historical influences on the policy trajectory. Up to the 1970s, foreign investment and integration with multinational corporations (MNCs) were the keys to a process of industrialization that developed the manufacturing sector, providing employment and reducing levels of poverty. However, in more recent years this strategy was found to have hindered the development of an indigenous entrepreneurial class. Following the Asia financial crisis of 1997, and under the influence of a global drive for talent, Singapore set about the task of developing entrepreneurs and corporations that could boast global reach, emulating national champion enterprises in the region such as Toyota, Sony, Acer, and Samsung. The notion of 'networked knowledge capitalism' and a narrative of 'strategic pragmatism' underpinned an outward-looking policy of leveraging off the expertise of MNCs to build indigenous expertise that would spearhead a drive towards gaining the competitive edge in export industries. The 'Global Schoolhouse' initiative was to be the engine for economic growth through which the city state would be rebranded as a knowledge and talent hub, developing entrepreneurialism, creativity, and cosmopolitanism in graduates, while benefiting from a perceived boost to reputation that would accrue from association with the global league-table leaders in HE. Since the mid-1990s the government has tactically and strategically invited 'world-class' and 'reputable' foreign universities – who are perceived as having achieved research-based entrepreneurialism – to set up campuses in the city state to support the ambition of becoming a regional education hub (Mok, 2008; Sidhu, 2009a; Sidhu *et al.*, 2011).

While the development of an entrepreneurial class may have been a central objective of education policy in Singapore, the principal measure designed to achieve that objective is not, however, unique to the city state. With the exception of Hong Kong, other leading nations in Asia aspire to partnership with Western universities who enjoy high ranking in the global league tables, albeit within different modes of governance and legal status. Some encourage partnership with established indigenous universities, while others have established separate degree-awarding colleges to run partnerships (Hill *et al.*, 2014; Huang, 2007; Mok, 2011; Mok, 2008; Pinna, 2009; Shams and Huisman, 2012; Smith, 2010; Sutrisno and Pillay, 2013; Waters and Leung, 2014; Wilkins and Huisman, 2012).

A reading of this literature through the lens of network power suggests that the national dimension works in symbiosis with international discourse communities that embody network power. Individuals may be 'rational agents' who choose on the basis of sound reasoning, but in the face of network power they are nevertheless entrapped into making decisions they would not make if their collective arrangements were different. Coordinating standards become more valuable the more people use them. Once the standard has network power, possible intrinsic reasons for adoption are eclipsed by the single most important extrinsic reason for adoption: that others already use the standard and that the point of the standard is to gain access to others. Indeed, as more nation states become adopters of global standards 'following the crowd' begins to 'feel safe', particularly when the only alternative is isolation. Policy divergences in the national policymaking arena in fact become functional for global policy convergence through the diffusion of global standards. In other words, local adaptation becomes the ultimate guarantee of convergence on the main global principles (Grewal, 2008; Grewal, 2003; King, 2010).

Cultural similarity and transnational communication in the context of global standards – Enablers of network power and false consensus?

King (2010) holds that nation states tend to be 'imperfect evaluators', relying on the accumulated wisdom of others and constrained by 'bounded rationality' while adjusting the global standard to fit local historical, political, and cultural conditions. The literature does evidence some measure of tension between adopting global network standards and maintaining a sense of national identity. For example, nation states fear that international standards will jeopardize sovereignty of national HE systems, indirectly inviting the influence of foreign values and priorities, particularly when 'canned' degree programmes embody the 'sanctioned ignorance' of the global template that claims universality, but projects the implicit values of the exporter. In this context quality assurance and standards again emerge as defining parameters. The proponents of trade liberalization in HE argue that quality will be enhanced by global competition. Others maintain that the fundamental issues surrounding quality are rooted in the asymmetry of interests between exporters of HE services – who are concerned about finance and reputation, want easy market entry, equal treatment, and minimum control – and importers – who want to protect consumers from disreputable transnational operators, build quality capacity, and minimize the displacement effect of TNHE on local providers. However, the influence of asymmetry of importer/exporter interests becomes problematic given that more nation states are fulfilling a dual importer/exporter role in trade in HE services (Cheung, 2006; Grewal, 2008; Gift *et al.*, 2006; Lim, 2010; Smith, 2010; Stella, 2006; Yang, 2008). Any East/West, North/South binary divide blurs in an environment where the predominant aspiration is to expand exports (and for some, assume regional hub status) and the prevailing assumption is that sound business practices and/or benchmarking exercises are sufficient to assure quality. It is however, interesting to note that the Indonesian approach to quality challenges that of its neighbours. The Indonesian model requires that: foreign providers

should ensure that offerings provide institutional mission-fit; that effective resources are available to support learning; that credentials are valid in both home and host country; that offerings meet national needs; and finally, that funding arrangements should contribute to investment in the host country. It is probably equally significant that in an exercise conducted by the British Council in 2013 to assess opportunities for TNHE based on a review of national policy and regulations in place, Indonesia was ranked as offering 'below average' opportunities (British Council, 2013; Gift *et al.*, 2006; Hill *et al.*, 2014; Lim, 2010; Mok, 2008; Shams and Huisman, 2012; Stella, 2006).

It appears that as nation states assume the dual role of importer/exporter, the needs of trade again take precedence over other national priorities in dictating policy. In other words, the power of the global standard has directly transferred without variation or adaptation to the national setting. It may be the case that in this regional context, the network power of global standards is reinforced by cultural similarity that influences patterns of interpretation and perception, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of convergence mechanisms. In countries with elementary cultural linkages such as common language, shared history or religion, similar political institutions, and similar socio-economic contexts, suggestions may be decoded in similar ways, leading to similar reforms. Common structural factors such as human resources, educational background, and uncompetitive HE systems, coupled with the level of public debts and the state's capacity to solve problems are equally significant in reinforcing the network power of the global standard, prompting countries to move in a similar direction and grow together (Heinze and Knill, 2008; King, 2010).

Notwithstanding cultural similarity as a factor in enhancing the network power of global standards, some researchers argue that the very act of nation states engaging in transnational communication can have a similar effect. In transnational communication lessons are readily drawn from others, transnational elite groups of professionals who share similar perceptions of the problems they face are drawn to similar solutions, emulation of policy emerges as a critical mass of adopters is reached, and international organizations increasingly define objectives and standards in the policy field (Voegtle *et al.*, 2011; Vögtle and Martens, 2014).

Clearly governments may be cognizant of their historically derived circumstances when exposed to worldwide networks of policymakers but the network power of global standards embodied in the discourse of knowledge-based economy and global competitiveness means that global path dependency predominates over localism in national policymaking arenas. Cultural similarity and the very act of transnational communication reinforces network power, locking national actors into the standards and norms of the globalized, neo-liberal model of 'knowledge-based economy' while expunging any commitment to alternative narratives.

Local-organizational influences on policymaking

Local-institutional knowledge and discourse communities premised on dissensus: Detracting from the network power of the global standard?

The current transformation of universities is not simply determined by the 'global' or indeed the 'national' perspective, since there may be room in the institutional setting to conduct normative arguments about which types of relationships globalization 'ought' to be about, conceptualizing globalization processes as deliberative constructions created in a range of sites and moments across institutional trajectories, rather than as a process of 'fatalistic determinism' or as following the same 'inevitable script'. Universities, like nation states, are at once both the object and the agent of globalization. While structure and agency are co-constitutive and the accumulation of network power within local institutional structures may constrain agency, academic discourse

communities tend to be constituted on a culture of dissensus that may provide a counterweight to the false, simulated consensus that emerges from other discourse communities in which consensus is pursued as an end in itself (King, 2010; Tadaki and Tremewan, 2013).

Wilkins and Huisman (2012) deploy Scott's (1995) institutional theory of organizational change, which focuses on the three pillars of regulation, normative structures and affinities, and cultural-cognition, to understand how universities respond to the process of globalization as it impacts on TNHE policy decision-making processes. Essentially, Wilkins and Huisman (2012) argue that the application of institutional theory to the field of TNHE suggests that in an age of uncertainty university leaders' decisions are made ideologically and normatively rather than rationally, a process that limits the scope for diversity of approach and encourages isomorphic structures and processes that assume that elite global status is synonymous with a high level of quality. The power of normative structures and affinities coupled with cultural-cognitive influences is also implied in research that shows that while universities adopt corporate practices they do not necessarily aspire to become private enterprises and prefer to participate in markets while continuing to receive state subsidy. Healey (2008) agrees with Wilkins and Huisman (2012), arguing that confused government policy has promoted uncertainty across the HE sector, temporarily making the unregulated overseas market more attractive than the domestic market. While the TNHE model assumes ascendancy, the recent explosion in global growth is viewed as a 'blip' deriving from uncertainty that masks a much more modest underlying trend (Healey, 2008; Kauppinen, 2012; Kauppinen, 2015; Wilkins and Huisman, 2012).

The impact of mixed messages regarding governance, and the influence of normative standards and affinities in organizational contexts, is demonstrated by the experience of Singapore's flagship initiative to acquire regional education hub status. Arguably, the Global Schoolhouse was not a partnership in substance because the Singaporean government assumed most of the financial risks. Nevertheless, partnerships with the University of New South Wales and Johns Hopkins University, both world leaders, failed. For Sidhu (2009b) these alliances unravelled because, despite the discursive machinery of the global knowledge-economy standard, key players failed in their ability to embody and translate 'global imaginary' into globalizing practices and outcomes.

Edwards *et al.* (2010) consider the institutional outsourcing of university degrees through a lens of transaction cost theory, complementing Sidhu's work in showing how engaging global imaginaries and developing globalizing practices and outcomes can fall foul of the very complexity of partnership arrangements. Essentially, transaction cost theory has two elements. Firstly 'bounded rationality', which at the level of institutional partnership holds that the more complex the context, the more difficult it is for one party to understand the other's requirements and the more difficult it is to monitor performance. The second element of transaction cost theory is opportunism, termed self-interest seeking with guile, whereby one partner may seek to gain by misleading the other through providing misleading or distorted information.

TNHE through the lens of transaction cost theory seems to lead to the same destination as TNHE through the lens of institutional theory, that is, university leaders' decisions are likely to be made ideologically and normatively rather than rationally in the face of risk and uncertainty – a process that limits the scope for diversity of approach. Research into institutional responses to the forces of globalization in HE therefore suggests that while the network power of the global standard is reinforced in transnational and national settings, variation in institutional response to the global standard is equally constrained by factors that limit the possibilities of alternative narratives and diversity of approach.

TNHE delivering perverse outcomes for key stakeholders?

It seems logical to assume that students want TNHE programmes in order to benefit from wider access to new ideas and methods that will at least enhance their employability and at best enable them to make a real contribution to the current and future societies in which they live. However, in the particular case of Hong Kong, practitioner research has shown that TNHE programmes simply reproduce existing class inequalities and societal exclusion around education as students experience spatial and symbolic separation from local students and fail to build a common sense of identity. Since TNHE programmes afford their students less social capital and cultural capital their studies are ultimately devalued with attendant implications for their future employment prospects and social mobility (Waters and Leung, 2012; Waters and Leung, 2013; Waters and Leung, 2014).

Of course Hong Kong has over a long period of time interacted with the UK, a key adopter of current globalizing standards rooted in the Thatcher administrations of the 1980s. The resemblance between the experience and outcomes of access to HE for TNHE students in Hong Kong, who enter HE by an 'alternative route', and the much-publicized experience and outcomes for 'widening participation' students in the UK is striking. Shortcomings perpetuate inequalities in both contexts. TNHE students in Hong Kong, like their UK equivalents, do not feel like 'real' students, but in many ways they are further disadvantaged. Not only are they hampered in developing relationships with lecturers and peers, but they also have limited access to campus facilities, including computer facilities, and limited access to the home institution virtual learning environment (VLE) (Leung and Waters, 2013).

While widening access to higher education through TNHE may have seemingly unintentional outcomes, it is interesting to note that at the 'elite' end of the scale perverse outcomes are equally evident. Lauder (2011) shows how the 'corporate war for talent' is a ubiquitous ideology that translates into a strategy for recruitment by transnational corporations of graduates from a few select universities of high reputation. He suggests that through the forces of globalization universities now play the same reputational games as transnational corporations in pursuit of 'world class' status and engage in a mutually complementary 'tango' that offers the prospect of reciprocal brand enhancement. A key question becomes, what and whose interests are driving quality regimes at the local-institutional level? Rather than any notion of quality assurance to protect the interests of the consumers of TNHE, Lauder's (2011) work implies that the supply-side holds more sway within policy decision-making structures that foreground institutional reputation and branding. Indeed, in the face of intense competition, the single most important driver of quality schemes is the need for providers to differentiate themselves from competitors (Lauder, 2011; Lim, 2010).

The human-capital approach to HE clearly exudes network power that permeates from the global down to the institutional level of policy formation, where the notion of graduate employability has virtually eliminated alternative perspectives, extinguishing any notion of universities widening access to enhance graduates' social mobility. That said, however, perverse outcomes have also accrued from the application of the globalizing human-capital standard in the local-institutional setting. For example, China boasts a very large pool of graduates, but less than 10 per cent of Chinese candidates for graduate jobs are seen as suited to work in a foreign company. They are often perceived as lacking confidence, capability, and critical thinking skills to support global managerial competencies and decision-making in different contexts and cultures. Evidence also suggests that even those students who gravitate towards highly reputable joint ventures such as the University of Nottingham Ningbo Campus – which is not a branch campus of Nottingham but an independent entity owned by Zhejiang Wanli University – are worried

about the legal status of their institutions and public recognition of their study programmes (Bolton and Nie, 2010; Mok and Xu, 2008).

Conclusions

Examining TNHE policymaking through the lens of network power challenges over-simplified binary distinctions between policy convergence and divergence in the diffusion of global standards. To return to the metaphor of ‘tectonic plates’, this review of literature suggests that while there may be constant movement and interaction between the levels and layers of TNHE policymaking, such movement tends to operate like concentric circles that always lead back to the same origin. This is not to give way to any notion of ‘fatalistic determinism’ in the context of globalization. Rather it is to acknowledge the force of network power assumed by the global standard that constrains individual and collective agency, progressively eliminating all possible perspectives save that of the knowledge-based economy underpinned by global neo-liberalism. In an environment where the alternative to convergence – which assures membership of ‘the club’ – is isolation, the local works in symbiosis with the global and local adaptation and divergence become functional for convergence on the main global principles.

Applying the notion of network power to the TNHE policy field challenges the validity of East–West and North–South binaries in explaining policy trends. Irrespective of different historical antecedents, socio-economic contexts, institutional frameworks, and future aspirations for social mobility and cohesion, conformity rather than diversity is the order of the day. The force of network power is enhanced in TNHE networks and discourse communities premised on the need to achieve consensus that is simultaneously the glue that binds actors in common perceptions, giving precedence to groupthink rather than the imaginative engagement of dissensus that invites creative conflict as the mechanism by which new ways of being in the world emerge. While there is some evidence of counter-narratives, particularly in relation to quality assurance and the emphasis on branding and institutional reputation rather than on students’ learning, future employment prospects, and social mobility, that literature is quite sparse. Capacity building synonymous with widening access in pursuit of social goals has – within the structure of the globalized knowledge economy – given way to the primacy of ‘talent’ and ‘elitism’.

King (2010) suggests, however, that global models do not dominate in perpetuity; the closer the trend to universalism, the greater the tension between local and changing circumstances and the anti-innovative conformism of the dominant model. As today’s grand narrative becomes yesterday’s outmoded thinking, paradigms shift and a new ‘grand narrative’ emerges. As for how the new grand narrative will emerge, the words of John Michael Greer are instructive: ‘the best approach to an unpredictable future is dissensus: that is, the deliberate avoidance of consensus and the encouragement of divergent approaches to the problems we face’ (Greer, 2009). This article therefore calls for more research into the ‘entrapping’ aspects of global social relations, which challenges the perverse outcomes of globalized knowledge-based economy models in HE. It is argued that the network power embodied in the global standard limits the likelihood of that emerging in current mainstream policymaking discourse communities and the site for future enlightenment is the local-institutional level, harnessing the dissensus of the academic community with the needs and aspirations of our students.

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