Internationalising Nordic Higher Education: Comparing The Imagined With Actual Worlds of International Scholar-practitioners

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Abstract

This comparative case study addresses a timely issue engaging researchers involved in the internationalisation of Nordic Higher Education, in the context of Sweden and Finland. The study examines a hypothetical imaginary in the transition between university international policy statements and their understandings from the position of a globalised episteme. The investigation forms a tag-project as part of a funded large international research project examining ethical internationalism in times of global crises, involving a partnership between more than twenty higher education institutions in excess of ten countries across five continents. The data was collected using a mixed-methods design, whilst being controlled across the matched data collection period in 2013-2014. Data consisted of policy texts, surveys and interviews. The current research inquiry reports on a *within and across* comparative analyses of certain policy texts and follow-up interviews with university management. The results yield logical support for a global higher education imaginary driving internationalisation in ways which reveal paradoxical associations between the imagined and the real worlds of international scholar-practitioners.

Keywords: internationalisation; imaginary; epistemic imperatives; world society theory; Sweden; Finland

Introduction

For the past three to four decades, internationalisation of higher education has been a key global research area which has received surprisingly little attention within the Nordic comparative scholarship on higher education. This paper contributes to the latter by offering a case report of comparative results obtained from a Nordic tag-project aligned to a large international consortium investigation on ethical internationalism in higher education (EIHE) (Andreotti, Stein, Pashby, & Nicolson, 2016). Central to the investigation is an acute interest in examining conceptualisations of a global imaginaries and epistemes

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driving the internationalisation of higher education. In the global higher education imaginary, these epistemic imperatives of internationalisation are persistently defined at economic and political levels while causing vulnerability and fragmentation at academic levels.

The research inquiry in this paper is conceptually emergent with world society theory applied to international higher education by relying on phenomenologist cultural constructivism (Meyer, 2010). It seeks to identify the imagined hypothetical from the actual social worlds of actors (Krücken & Drori, 2009) affecting the ways in which international education may be conceptualised. The investigative focus derives from the modern global expansion of economically driven integration of education and employment as determined by organizations such as the OECD, the European Union and World Economic Forum. These international organisations have over the past decades constituted imperatives which have affected the values, ethics and intentions of higher education in unprecedented ways (Cowen, 2009; De Boer & File, 2009; Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005; Pusser, Kempner, & Marginson, 2012).

The sense of uncertainty prevailing in internationalisation of higher education is factually warranted. In the wake of the World Financial Crises of 2007-09, the world economic system is challenging universities to increase competitive knowledge production and strive for innovation driven by social imaginaries (Taylor, 2002). This demands universities to raise employability targets of ever more highly-skilled, globally aware young graduates and by utilizing internationalisation to accomplish these means. There is considerable pressure on higher education institutions to internationalise performance, supporting a never before seen escalation of education reform (Altbach, 2016; Aubrey Douglas, 2016; Marginson, 2016). It has been predicted that this trend will accelerate even further in times of economic downturn directing universities towards renewed socioeconomic means for revenue raising (WEF, 2011).

The market imperatives affecting higher education are felt across the EU-region (Engel, Sandström, van der Aa, & Glass, 2015), including the Nordic countries despite their globally unique equity-oriented tradition. Among them, Finland and Sweden have seen the most compelling case of higher education reform (Ahola, Hedmo, Thomsen, & Vabo, 2014) as young EU-member states. After joining the EU in 1995, the two countries have responded differently to internationalisation of higher education, and especially in relation to the Bologna process since its inauguration in 1999. Finland has a quantitatively positive recent history of implementing international higher education by having achieved the 20-percent EU mobility target through systematic reforms dating back to the 1980s (Ahola et al., 2014; Välimaa, 2012).

In the Swedish higher education reform case, the government incentives (HsV, 2008:15R) to internationalise have to date not been shaped by coherence in the system (Göthenberg, 2014). Three major reforms in the past 20-year period have not resulted in agreement on indicators nor outcomes in terms of academic accountability (but see Ahola et al., 2014 for a statistical overview). In each country, the higher education field is more

or less decentralised giving universities freedom to internationalise within the limits of the national and EU mandates, but the incentives, ideologies and policies differ. This freedom points towards a degree of variability in Nordic internationalisation structures which encourages aligned comparative analyses within and between educational fields of the sort reported in this tag-project report.

The scholarly attributes of international cooperation and free intellectual exchange across borders and the traditional interest in the advancement of (higher education) knowledge provide a pendulum indicator to current reforms, also known as the commodity production of (higher) knowledge (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). The internationalisation of higher education is nationally contested by increasing fragmentation and uncertainty (Andreotti et al., 2016) in terms of investment value aspects entailed in and by the internationalisation initiatives across EU member states. The higher education field is caught in the conflict between the degree of internationalisation and academic quality, breaking the assumption that merely having internationalisation policies in place provides for higher quality. Concurrently, a normative functionalist panacea predicates that internationalisation in itself enhances academic quality, causing universities to embark in a grand writing project of international vision statements and aligned strategic initiatives. This remains baffling to students and unresolved by faculty as they do not translate effortlessly into observable action and real outcomes. Conceptually then, this culminates in an ill-fit between visions and their accomplishment in internationalising higher education (Hellstén & Reid, 2008). This motivates the current conceptual and empirical exploration of the imagined and the authentic which, if left unexamined, may lead to contested imaginaries of internationalisation and contradictory impulses of educational practice (Khoo, Haapakoski, Hellstén, & Malone, in print).

Internationalisation of higher education research

Internationalisation grew out of the globalisation movement of the late twentieth century and was historically defined on the basis of trade theories and economic principles (Altbach & Knight, 2007: Kuzhabekova, Hendel, & Chapman, 2015; Robertson & Buhari-Gulmez, 2015). In modernity, the internationalisation of higher education is frequently discussed in relation to the general topic of globalisation, which includes political and market regulated flows of people, money, goods and services (Altbach, 2016; Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005). Many internationalisation policies are influenced by the world economy forcing universities to compete on idealistic combined with epistemic imperatives such as excellence and world-class scholarship (Times Higher Education, 2017).

The agenda is adaptable to world society theory (Meyer, 2010) which claims that global political and economic systems are ever more integrated. Modernisation drives a global academic ecosystem which is converging in internationalisation and concurrently brings about a clouding of definitions without any critical inquiry, for example, about internationalisation and international pedagogy being taken to mean the same thing

(Teelken & Wihlborg, 2010). Such complexity jeopardizes higher education toward uniformity based on conflicting advice and warranting concurrent international competition and collaboration, without questioning its net scholarly and educational benefits.

Global concerns about the internationalisation of higher education were framed by organisational combined with system level perspectives (King, Marginson & Naidoo, 2013), closely linked to economical-political-policy demands (Altbach, 2016). Focus was located on academic and organisational climates and cultures, viewing education primarily from an organisational perspective, as being linked to economy, politics and policy. The societal position and role of universities have also been researched in relation to an external global environment. The political and economic forces of globalisation impact higher education in terms of *market competition* allowing transnational corporations to wield power that transcends national borders (King, Marginson & Naidoo, 2013). Universities are increasingly expected to operate in what new world economic regimes coined as a knowledge-based economy. Crucial qualifiers within global higher education development are university rankings and recruitments of international students as a way to generate revenue for higher education institutions. It invites the critical question, how do we associate internationalisation incentives with overall higher educational quality?

Marginson (2009) discusses the escalating development in terms of status competition between leading higher education institutions. Other factors are the new technologies, political austerity measures in state funding, that create unrealistic institutional exertions in revenue raising expeditions. This trend resonates well with the socio-phenomenologist cultural construct (Meyer, 2010) which holds that "Actor agency is made real through the highly expanded educational systems now found everywhere" (p. 20). As shown thus far, research in the past 20 years documents that the rapidly intensifying international education market (e.g. Altbach, 2016; Knight, 2012; Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005) and swift technological advances have imposed unprecedented pedagogical demands on the scholarship on internationalisation (Hellstén & Reid, 2008; Trahar, 2011). Concurrently, there is anxiety about lowering academic standards endangered by a perceived fragmentation in and of the field. Counteracting such fragmentation may derive from what Andreotti (2012) called epistemic discord about internationalized curriculum content, feared employability factors and dissonant conceptions of pedagogy. These are the most critical components of world societies in internalization processes. Epistemic imperatives of globalisation in turn, distort scholarly engagement, diversification or the potential for transformation of intellectual experiences throughout life.

Thus, the exploration of epistemic globalities also determines academic culture(s) as institutional imperative practice that creates, preserves, reproduces, and develops through collegial choices of action, participation, relationships, communication and values (Lehtomäki, Moate, & Posti-Ahokas, 2016). These are well in line with the latest Bologna priorities leading up to 2020 (being the social dimension, lifelong learning, employability, student centred learning, mobility and multidimensionality). Such issues inform on how institutional forces impose on learning and establish the interrogation of the epistemic

operations of international educational practices in times of change beyond 2030. Agency is directed towards the imagined and imperative academic knowledges in the internationalisation process.

The comparative research on internationalisation in higher education seems well timed as the role of higher education is also emphasized in the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) leading towards 2030 and adopted by the UN in September 2015 (UN, 2015). The SDG goal number 4 on 'good quality education for all' requires ensuring the equality, equity and inclusion at all levels of education. The interdependency between good quality education and achievement of other SDGs has been analysed and highlighted by the UN agencies and the World Bank (UNDESA, 2015), thus calling for improved knowledge generation and sharing of qualitative research elements. The interpretation is that it is pivotal to understand how internationalisation and cross-border collaboration in higher education contribute to the quality of education delivery. This utilisation of knowledge may assist higher education institutions to review their roles in social change and design knowledge-based transformative agendas (Robson, 2011), as the SDGs cannot be viably achieved without the flow of progress in global collaboration in education (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015).

In the theoretical implications outlined above, the concept of episteme is adopted as an ontological category representing the theory construction framing a dynamic of an *education-oriented* mind-set for researching international communities of scholars in two comparative domains. It makes use of the concept of global imaginary (Castoriades, 1987) as a new heuristic (Pashby, Haapakoski, Hellstén, & Khoo, 2016) for analysing the social globalities from the hypothetical to the actual in the academic world of a collectively configured international community of scholars. Meyer's (2010) world society theory is well aligned here with the methodology of epistemic and global imaginaries, in that it allows for a scrutinising of the principles leading the human interest ahead, by reliance on universal values, benevolence, peace, cooperation between nations, and the striving for common goals of moral practice by defending the vulnerable. However, the self-interest of nations combined with institutions driving global economics expansion may cause a loss of influence at the ground level creating inequality and ensuing unethical practice. Meyer's (2010) theory is therefore particularly useful for articulating complexities of the international education episteme that may be otherwise impossible to transfer into ethical, equitable, workable human agency.

Methodological concerns

Comparative and international methodology has a rigorous tradition of connecting issues within and across the social fabric of nations and societies (Cowen, 2009). The adopted method contributes to the field by applying within and across comparisons in a holistic, multidimensional, heuristic and conceptual research approach (see e.g. Bray, Adamson,

Mason, 2014). The analytic framework applied in this tag-project aligns with the methodology developed and utilised in the large EIHE consortium project (Andreotti, 2012). It is generative in the sense that the data-driven process denounces an 'a priori' state of assumptions to be tested for truth value, but allows for conceptually dynamic deliberation that goes beyond a mere description of comparative categories. Within this method, a series of intelligibilities, intricacies and reiterations, and responses to the fragmentation and shifting grounds of international higher education become analytically and comparatively malleable (Khoo, Haapakoski, Hellstén, & Malone, in print).

In this tag-project of the international EIHE partnership (Andreotti, 2012) focus is set on a small comparative sample of empirical survey responses collected from several higher education institutions in Sweden and Finland (Andreotti, 2012). The EIHE project is an Academy of Finland-funded large international research project with over 20 participating universities in more than ten countries and across five global continents. The aim of the EIHE is to investigate global imperatives imposing upon internationalisation by creating epistemic difference, challenging issues of accountability, and the civic role of the university. Empirical (survey, interviews, documents) data were collected at each participating university and at policy, institutional, management, administrative, academic staff and student levels. The data was collected by utilising matched methods from each university during the same time period in 2013-2014 and resulted in a large common database consisting of both text-based surveys and interview data materials. The data reported on in this article consists of thematic summative excerpts compiled from 200 surveys and a number of in-depth interviews from a number of universities in Sweden and Finland (for details, see Andreotti, 2012).

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the hosting university and each participating university, respectively. Within the research cohort, consensus was achieved by allowing consortium partners to utilise the common database for a range of within and across comparative analyses and dissemination of results. Some principal methodological positions were agreed upon and which served as foundation for a discursively oriented approach, whilst allowing for a variety of epistemological positions to inform individual tag-projects emanating from the common large body of collected consortium project data. The common methodological locus is that of the social imaginary (Taylor, 2002) as a framework for a notion of being and becoming and the "university as an imagined space" (Andreotti, et.al., 2016, p. 3).

Comparing the imagined international with the localised actual

The data analyses in the current comparative tag-project maintain the fundamental research consensus agreed upon by the EIHE consortium, by examination of the 'international higher education imaginary'. However, it elaborates on methodology by comparing the imagined international with the actual social world of actors, wherein 'the imagined' is characterised by higher education policy vision and mission statements. The 'actual

worlds of actors' in the current methodology are constitutive of interview data excerpts collected from the higher education institutions in Finland and Sweden.

In a comprehensive account of the entrepreneurialisation of the university, Marginson and Considine (2001) illustrate that the globalisation imagery of higher education has blurred the boundaries between the ideal and mundane academic actions. Universities caught in the international corporatisation treadmill are inadvertently compelled to seek endless reinvention and renewal. One such measure is the official articulation of vision statements, which are made available through mission statements and centralised strategic initiatives. Paradoxically, such policy statements make excellent data for an interrogation of the agency of an international imaginary. This justifies the first comparative manoeuvre of the current analyses.

The statements in Table 1 form a summative description of the representative types of vision and mission articulations found in the data collected from the Finland and Sweden. In order to comply with the ethical principles, only the summative and representational connotations of policy statements are presented so as not to single out institutions in the corpus of data.

Table 1. Summarised university vision and mission statements in Finland and Sweden

Finland	Sweden
Internationalisation is a cornerstone strategy	Internationalisation is a strategic priority
Leveraging international strategies as quality enhancing	Internationalisation is a collective mission
International strategic partnership alignment with Nordic universities	Strategic regional internationalisation as focus in neighbouring countries
Internationalisation to meet external market pressures	Internationalisation as emblematic of sustainable development
Internationalisation as mainstreamed in university core activities	Internationalisation as unity in diversity
Internationalisation as a measure for global competitiveness	Internationalisation as a mission of transnational cooperation
Internationalisation for promoting globalisation	Internationalisation as competitive business collaborator
Internationalisation as symbolic of 'best practice'	'Best' in internationally acclaimed research output

The combined university vision and mission statements invoke an internationalisation imaginary that is in alignment with the global market-oriented policy imperatives seen elsewhere in the higher education sector. Important determinants of this policy imaginary are exertions toward cross-institutional status competition (Marginson, 2009), raising hypothetical indicators toward top performance and strategic quality boosting incentives.

This process may also be interpreted as hypothetical as mission and vision statements seldom lead to real outcomes at ground level.

The comparative epistemic imperatives driving hypothetical internationalisation in policy visions differ only marginally between the two countries, with the Swedish university visions showing slightly softer power configurations than articulated in the data from Finland. In both countries the internationalisation imaginary acknowledges regional development with neighbouring countries as a symbol of institutional expansion.

The epistemes of globalisation are saliently present in both data sets in which internationalisation symbolises what has aptly been termed the commodity production effect (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). The intelligibilities of collectivity, sustainability and unity in diversity being characteristic in the Swedish university policy statements make the most notable comparative epistemic dissonance, with no matching counterpart in the statements summarised from Finland.

The second locus of epistemic interrogation is generated in the discursive interpretations culminating in the international imaginary as identified by interviewees from higher education institutions in the two countries. Again, the ethical principles were adhered to by only allowing for the summative and representational connotations of interview statements being presented so as not to single out institutions in the corpus of data.

Table 2. Summarised university management interview statements in Finland and Sweden

Finland	Sweden
Target placed at top 50 universities, but rankings not essential, provides a paradox	Internationalisation representing diversification of higher education
Internationalisation is a form of income generation for universities	Shortage of curriculum offers in English obstructs international enrolments
Internationalisation is subsidised by the Ministry through specific budget indicators	No specific budget assigned to internationalisation seen as impeding implementation
Internationalisation has to date not yielded increased revenue for universities	-
Leveraging internationalisation as a necessary part of accreditation and quality assurance	International faculty members excluded from contributing collegially with low academic support
Staff lacking in English proficiency is hampering internationalisation	Obstacles to internationalisation are attributed to low-level English language skills among faculty
International variation in degree structures is seen as a deterrent of mobility	Need to promote curriculum in the English language to attract more international enrolments
Incoming mobility is taken as indicator of 'globalising the curriculum'	Internationalisation at home: local students refrain from taking part in internationalisation incentives

Internationalisation is a struggle between time and resources	Diverse student backgrounds among home student body interpreted as internationalisation indicator

Table 2 shows the comparative variation of inferences between the institutional world of actors of international higher education in Sweden and Finland. The overall discourse in both countries can be taken to signify a globalised internationalisation episteme owing to an imaginary of economic and competition-oriented imperatives, upon localised authenticities. Table 2 illustrates the suggestion whether the international imaginary shapes a chase on the treadmill of coercive knowledge production, which is predicated upon a collegial countering of its implementational potential. Whilst the interview data from Finland yields a comparatively clearer hard-line, and globalised imaginary than does the data from its neighbour, the Swedish data articulates a less structured approach albeit embedded in ambiguity and soft-policy measures.

In comparing the two data sets, Table 1 and 2 make visible the contrasting ways in which local international offices respond to the predictable refrain in university vision and mission statements that simultaneously convey a paradox between a normative hypothetical essentialist internationalisation episteme (i.e. the policy data) and it's perhaps relentless retributory modes of action (the interview data). In both data sets, the 'actual world of social actors' (Meyer, 2010) that finds itself within the grips of internationalisation missions (Table 1) are left with the meagre option but to antagonise vulnerabilities, embedded in local obstacles, deterrents, struggles, and impediments to real implementation (Table 2). Paradoxically then, actualising the interchange from mission statements to real life intelligibilities remains a matter of normalizing the intrinsic human instability in fronting international systems of adaptation.

Limitations

As stated in the introduction of this article, the current analyses form a smaller tag-project to a larger multinational and cross-institutional higher education study (Andreotti, 2012). As such, it necessarily selects a distinct set of units of comparison from two neighbouring countries, with two educational data sets that directly respond to the conceptual objectives. It is possible that alternative modes of readings are available from the same data, however as explained, the heuristic choices utilised in the current analyses have been carefully deliberated (Andreotti et al., 2016) to give justice to an accurate within and across comparative research design. As such, the analyses presented in this small case report are limited to the comparison of the imagined hypothetical to the actual worlds of actors (Meyer, 2010) and should be read within the larger frame of the EIHE project publications (see Andreotti, 2012). Further research may consider the deeper analyses of the role of agency as a major influence on a more integrated higher education system,

including of course, the analyses of policy borrowing. This focus would contribute comparatively to further studies of conceptualisations between world society theory, world system theory and world culture theory.

Concluding comments

The results of this short case study provide support for a conceptually intensifying imaginary of internationalisation that is contiguous to the policy visions articulated in the two comparative data sets. Across interviews in both Finland and Sweden, statements made by informants can be lexically clustered as matching within each university and resonate almost identically with the policy statements within universities, but are simultaneously contrasting between universities. This provides a clear indication of the discursive power of the written policy data texts on forming aligned international epistemes regardless of their truth value, and thus remaining in the imagined hypothetical. Generally, the influence of comparison supports a feasible adaptation of Meyer's (2010) world society theory. It is evident in comparisons made between 'the imagined hypothetical' of the university vision and mission statements, with 'the actual social worlds of actors' appearing in utterances made and in discourse on university management. These entities are working within the confines of such policy statements. It provides further evidence on the case of an increasingly integrated higher education system in our comparative case of the two countries.

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