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**Geography is our friend: Space and scale in higher education**

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**[opening slide]**

How do we make sense of a higher education world in which activity goes on in several dimensions or spaces, often simultaneously? **[hit change of slide to bring up date]** In higher education we are local people, national people and often also global people at the same time, we have multiple identities, and many relate to higher education in the city, the state or province, or a larger region crossing national boundaries, as in Europe or Southeast Asia.

**[outline of webinar slide]**

That is my topic today. The multi-scalar space of higher education and knowledge, and how we conceive and practise it. What is space in higher education; space as social relations and space as constructed by people; space as materiality, imagining and practices; space in the form of geographical scales and how they interface and connect and disconnect. Space making in higher education joined to power, and space making as an act of power.

**[Doreen Massey version of slide]**

In the discussion I will draw on insights from human geography to better understand space and scale in higher education, including the work of the late Doreen Massey, who was a Professor of Geography, and especially her book *For Space* published in 2005.

**[The glonacal paper]**

Two decades ago the journal *Higher Education* published a paper by myself and Gary Rhoades titled ‘Beyond national states, markets, and systems of higher education: a glonacal agency heuristic’. The paper was written during intense discussions about globalisation, meaning worldwide integration and convergence in the economy, society and culture. There was unprecedented growth in cross-border activity in higher education, including student mobility, collaboration in science, university partnerships and consortia, offshore branch campuses, and global ‘e-universities’, not to mention policy borrowing and the spread of Anglo-American models and information into emerging systems. Global rankings kicked off a year after the paper was published.

**[Higher education is a *multiscalar* sector]**

We argued that although cross-border activity was growing rapidly, higher education studies lacked ‘a framework for conceptualising agencies and processes that extend beyond the nation-state’. The standard national model, with local institutions embedded in the national system, plus international activity at the edges of the system, could not fully grasp either the global or the local. We also pushed back against the then widespread belief that national and global power were zero-sum, so that the advance of globalization in higher education *must* mean the weakening of the nation-state. Nation-states continued to define, regulate and fund the sector. The glonacal paper said that all the geographical scales - local, national, regional, global – were in play. Higher education is a *multi-scalar* sector in which institutional and individual agents have open possibilities and causation flows from any scale.

**[Expanding global scale in science]**

Since the 2002 publication of the glonacal paper its prognosis has been confirmed. First, activity in the global scale has expanded by leaps and bounds, especially in the area most affected by global communication, the flow of ideas and knowledge and the growth of networked research. A global science system has evolved, based on the common pool of papers in English and on collaboration and co-authorship. This now overshadows the separate national science systems, which must connect with the global circuit to reach the cutting edge. The global system is both exclusive and inclusive: it leaves out knowledge in languages other than English, and all indigenous knowledge. At the same time it brings many emerging nations freely into global science. Cross-border student mobility has grown from 2.4 million students to 6.1 million in 2019. There is also partial worldwide convergence in institutional models and forms like the degree, department and corporate management.

Second, in parts of the world the *regional* scale has also become larger and more active than it was in 2002. Third, in the *national* scale governments continue to be crucial everywhere in framing and funding higher education.

**[Review by Lee and Stensaker 2021]**

Developments since 2002 have confirmed that we work in a multiscalar sector and the global has not crowded out the national. Yet the geographical character of space and scale is still not well understood. In a summary of literature on international and global higher education Lee and Stensaker (2021) note there are three differing propositions that recur frequently: the role of nation-states is declining; the nation-state remains very important; and institutions adapt to global norms. So there is still little clarity on a central issue of spatiality. Not enough has been learned in two decades, even by raw observation of trends staring us in the face. Zero-sum thinking still clouds judgment – as if global norms and activity *must* reduce the authority, role or effectiveness of nation-states.

**[The limits of methodological nationalism]**

This in turn indicates the continuing, pervasive influence of methodological nationalism. Methodological nationalism is ‘the belief that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world’. The nation is sufficient to contain everything, so that if any other scale of activity becomes important, it is external to the normal, and at the expense of the nation. Methodological nationalism shapes the outlook of governments, national public debate, and much of social science. It occludes or marginalize phenomena beyond the nation-state. In higher education, it marginalize cross-border connections and excludes global systems like science.

The same stunted vision is apparent in much of the literature on ‘internationalisation’, as I discussed in last week’s webinar. The popular definition of internationalisation is couched so as to exclude globalisation and confine the outlook of higher education to the national scale. As Shahjahan and Grimm put it, this ‘precludes a planetary consciousness, as we are stuck in global discourses underpinned by nation-state categories and identities’. There is still a widespread inability to grasp the multi-scalar character of higher education. So today I am repeating and developing that message, with help from human geography.

**[Space = *social* spaces with material coordinates]**

What can human geography tell us? Space at one and the same time material, something we imagine, and something we practice as social relations. Social spaces are not pre-given structures lined up and waiting to be populated, like a row of empty aircraft hangers. Spaces are social spaces, constellations of relations that people make for themselves. David Harvey refers to ‘an actively produced field of *spatial ordering* that changes sometimes quickly and sometimes glacially over time’. Space takes many forms, such as markets, networks, villages, cities, multi-site organizations, and geographical scales like the global, national, regional and local. All of these spaces are *constructed*. There was always a planet earth, but our notions of *global* space were powerfully advanced by the 1960s pictures of the earth from space, and then by the 1990s roll-out of the Internet. *National* space is also constructed. The physical territory on which a nation pre-dates the nation. It is the claim to that territory, and the organisations, infrastructures, ideologies, narratives, rules and habits supporting that claim, that make the nation. Likewise, local higher education institutions do not spontaneously appear, like weeds. They are built and continually reproduced by names, buildings, programmes of study.

**[‘If time unfolds as change then space unfolds as interaction’]**

For Massey space and time are heterogeneous and intersect. ‘If time unfolds as change then space unfolds as interaction’. Time for Massey is the history of human agents, their ‘narratives’ or ‘trajectories’, their life journeys. Space is where the multiple agentic trajectories intersect. Space for Massey ‘is the *social* dimension … in the sense of engagement within a multiplicity’. Space is the ‘meeting up’ of people’s trajectories, ‘the sphere of relations, negotiations, practices of engagement, power in all its forms’, states Massey. ‘Space is the dimension which poses the question of the social, and thus of the political’.

Massey sharply critiques the idea that space is abstract and place is concrete. Her target is the influential global/local binary. Here global forces are seen as external, economic and dynamic, while local place is seen as internal, organic and fixed-residual, the victim of globalisation, that can only be subsumed by or defended from the global. Massey is well aware of the power of global capital, but debunks ideas of globalization as an abstract universal force, and the local as a fixed identity. The global and local are equally dynamic, equally social and each made by agents. Global activities ‘are utterly everyday and grounded, at the same time as they may, when linked together, go around the world’, she states. But locations are not equivalent. Local agency is unequal. ‘There is far more purchase in some places than others on the levers of globalization’. Her example is London. In higher education there are the Harvards and Tinghuas.

**[Space is agentic and multiple]**

Space for Massey is multiple, in all the forms of multiplicity: ‘diversity, subordination, conflicting interests’. The sphere of ‘the possibility of the existence of plurality, of the co-existence of difference’. Difference neither static nor discrete but continuously co-evolving, fusing and emerging. Space is unfinished, always becoming, forming new connections and new breaks between them. Space is moving, unpredictable and contingent. ‘There are always loose ends’, says Massey. She wants to ‘uproot “space”’ from concepts such as fixture, stasis and closure’ and ‘settle it’ among relationality and heterogeneity, so that the unknown can appear, what she calls ‘the positive creation of the new’. In higher education think of the global schoolhouse strategy in Singapore, Singapore as an education hub when it first began. Revolutionary. Think of NYU’s global university, in which students study for at least one year in two NYU campuses: New York, Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. Completely new when it first appeared. Like the first MOOCs. Space making.

**[How agents make space in higher education]**

How then do agents – persons, groups, institutions, national agencies – make social space in higher education? In *The Production of Space* (1991) Henri Lefebvre suggests a three-way relation between space as material, space as imaginative, and space as social practices and social relations. The three elements continually interact. The diagram fleshed out these three elements of space making in higher education. Like all such models the figure fixes and simplifies an irreducibly complex and continually moving reality.

In the figure, the material domain A includes pre-given *structures* such as communications networks, inherited institutions, infrastructures, language of use, laws, policies, and economic resources including sunk investments and ongoing funding. The lower two domains B and C especially embody individual, group and organisational *agency*. Perhaps the imagination and discourse in domain B are key elements when innovating in space making, but the three domains A-B-C closely interface which each other. In domain C agents rework the material resources from domain A, using ideas and interpretations in domain B, to build activities, programmes and organisations in higher education: ‘embedded material practices’ as Massey says. While imagining in domain B and social practices in domain C are sequential, the relation is not automatic. The same imagining of space, collectively developed and widely shared, can be associated many different interests and practices.

**[Acts of space making, acts of power]**

Causality moves around the circle. For example, governments with science infrastructure in domain A conceive science in domain B as a global arms race in technology, or as integral to nation-building. They construct an expanded and modernised national science capacity in domain C, augmenting domain A personnel and infrastructure. At the same time, the agency-heavy domains, imagining/interpretation in B and social practice and relations in C, continually constitute each other. For example, in the late 1990s stand-alone ‘e-universities’ failed to attract student customers to the on-line only format. This triggered critical reflection in the institutions, corporations and governments whose investments had failed. In the late 2000s the content-rich MOOC format emerged in domain B and was implemented in domain C, through existing institutions, first of all Stanford University. This was a more effective online model. The arms race in technology and the creation of the MOOC are both acts of space making, and also acts of power.

**[Ranking as space making: global higher education as one worldwide competition and hierarchy]**

League table rankings were first conceived in domain B by scholars in Shanghai and journalists in London, in 2003 and 2004, drawing on norms of scientific production and economic competition respectively. They were implemented in domain C, and this simulated a new and very widespread imagining in domain B – all over the world, university leaders and governments began to understand worldwide higher education sector as a global market, or global prestige competition, of ‘World-Class Universities’. This was implemented by them in domain C as investment and strategy, and reproduced in domain A with structural force as realigned organizations, policies and resource allocations. Across the world universities and countries became locked into incentives they would never have chosen, especially universities in the global South. Global rankings are a striking example of the potentials of spatial imagining when institutionalised in a successful practical prototype. I’m not saying it is a good thing. Ranking enforces a fierce global hierarchy and narrows the purposes and contributions of higher education. But a different kind of comparison-regulated space could be created. A shift from the Anglophone global pantheon to regional rankings would help many systems.

**[Eventually every space ‘escapes in part from those who make use of it’**

Because all space is multiple and relational, no closure is ever complete. As Lefebvre states, over time every space ‘escapes in part from those who make use of it’. For example, between 1985 and 2020 Chinese scientists made effective use of the US-led global science network, collaborating with US scientists and benchmarking with Euro-American universities, and this helped capacity building in China. China’s total global science output surpassed the US, and the leading Chinese universities achieved parity with US counterparts in high citation papers in the physical sciences and related disciplines. Open networking regime in science and worldwide higher education has facilitated more multi-polar capacity, apparent not just in the rise of China but also non-Western middle powers in India, South Korea, Iran, Brazil and elsewhere. The global science space – perhaps the global higher education space – has partly ‘escaped’ from Euro-American domination, to use Lefebvre’s term. But the rise of China in turn triggered a shift in US strategy, from global freedom to decoupling and selective closure. ‘The closed geographical imagination of openness, just as much as that of closure, is itself irretrievably unstable’, says Massey.

**[Multiple scales in higher education]**

Let’s look closer at space making in the different geographic scales. ‘Scale is a produced societal metric that differentiates space’. Scales like the national, global or regional are material, but only exist because we imagine and practice them. Shared scalar imagining in turn institutionalises what agents do, reproducing the scales in apparently stable ways. People think globally, act locally, feel national, see as a state, and so on. The scales vary on the basis of scope and proximity. The broadest scale in higher education is the *world as a whole* and eveything in it, including the other scales. Then there is the *global* or planetary scale. We are more aware of the global as the eco-system collapses around us, though hypnotised as we are by the nation, which demands all our attention, we don’t think globally often enough. There is the *pan-national regional* scale as in Europe. There is the *nation,* which occupies a large place in our heads. There is the *sub-national* region, the state or province, and the *city*. There is the proximate *local scale*, which in higher education includes both institutions, and fields of study and professional training. Arguably the three glonacal scales in mid blue are primary in higher education, though the pan-national region is a fourth primary scale in Europe.

**[In higher education and knowledge *all* the geographical scales are highly active]**

A striking feature of higher education, including research and knowledge in higher education, is that all the scales are active. In the *global* scale there is the science system; the processes of comparison, imitation and differentiation between institutions and countries on the world scale; the flows of ideas and information; the processes of cross-border connections and movement.

**[The pan-national regional scale]**

In the pan-national regional scale in Europe we have the Bologna reforms, the European Higher Education Area and Horizon Research. There is multilateral collaboration in Southeast Asia. Pan-national regions in other parts of the world are less developed but there is higher education activity across Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab countries.

**[Nation-states continue to be crucial in shaping higher education]**

The last three decades have seen an extended process of state and national economy building in much of the world. State building is normally accompanied by growing demand for higher education and a growing infrastructure and number of student places, meeting the growing demand for tertiary education. The nation-state continues to structure, regulate and part fund the sector. Within nations, higher education is often closely engaged in the development of local regions and cities.

**[The local scale of higher education - a secure unchanging haven in a moving world?]**

The dimension we best understand is the *local* scale, the self-regulated domain of daily life and neighbourhood, and in higher education, the institutions, the place of work and study. There is a material immanence in local higher education. We know its formal and informal rules. Here we feel ‘normal’. The local scale is familiar and seems fixed, permanent. But it is not.

**[CHANGE The local scale of higher education - a secure unchanging haven in a moving world?]**

The local scale is changing all the time. We make those changes, individually and collectively. As Arjun Appadurai puts it, ‘locality … has always had to be produced, maintained and nurtured deliberately … the local is not a fact but a project’. Like the other scales. There is no bedrock essential scale, the true unchanging site of identity. From the local to the global agents continually form themselves in one or more scale; and mobility across and between scales is another source of identity. Rachel Brooks finds that international student mobility constitutes a distinctive space ‘of identification and belonging’.

**[Scales in higher education are different to each other]**

The geographical scales are heterogenous, chalk and cheese. They operate in a different manner to each other. For example national activity, national vision, are continually reproduced by laws, regulations, policies, funding, systemic competition and cooperation, in a single geographical territory. The nation-state, government, is a powerful normative centre drawing activity together. The pan-national regional scale in Europe also has a normative centre, the European Commission, though it struggles to sustain authority in a nation-state world. The local scale combines the norms of institutions, functioning like toy-town nation-states, enforcing their rules, with bottom-up regulation by custom and practice deep-set in our minds. The global scale is different again. It has no normative centre – this is why we cannot deal with climate change – nor custom and practice that we have known since childhood. It is a space of activity in which higher education institutions, persons and nations do what they will. Global systems are voluntary. Yet global science and bibliometrics, and rankings, have become powerful informal regulatory systems.

**[Since the scholarly monasteries in india and the medieval universities in Europe, Higher education has had *two kinds* of cross-border connection: global and inter-national]**

The distinction between the national and global scales leads to two different kinds of cross-border relations. On one hand there are ‘inter-national’ relations between nations, or organisations or other agents located in two or more nations. On the other hand, there are ‘global’ relations that pass over nations and integrate us at planetary level. Those of you present in last week’s webinar have already heard me make this point but it’s important enough, and spatial enough, to be made again this week.

**[Mixing and matching geographical scales]**

As this example suggests, a feature of higher education is the way that agents combine the geographic scales and move freely between them. Agency and activity in any one scale can intersect with any of the other scales. Researchers who are over-regulated at the national or institutional level enhance their autonomy by tapping global disciplinary networks. University executives constrained by national underfunding and rules form partnerships with foreign universities and recruit foreign students to expand their prestige, their revenues and their pool of talent. Institutions proclaim a global mission and identity, though research suggests that when push comes to shove, their national identity takes precedence. All the same, agentic perceptions, potentials and experiences of scale vary by resources and position. Multi-scalar movement is easy for Anglophone universities that can go global without acquiring another language and culture. Others must build a larger portfolio of skills to move from local to global. In future global space will be more plural and less hegemonic.

**[There are no rules of space and place]**

There is more to be said, but I must bring you in. In conclusion, space, is one of the key coordinates of the higher education world, as important as capital and class, political culture and regulation, language and knowledge, and reproduced hierarchies of ethnicity-race and gender. Space is continually made and remade in encounters between agents. But single-scale visions, like methodological nationalism, must be cleared away to bring a fuller geography of higher education to life. ‘There are no rules of space and place’. What matters is the social relations that constitute, and are constituted by, each spatial configuration. Setting aside scalar determinism that privileges the national, or global, and all so called ‘social laws’ based on a pre-given structure, allows a fuller scope for emerging agency. As we see today in the struggle for woman, life and freedom in Iran, the student and other human trajectories coming together in a new democratic space, agency is our hope.

What is actual in human society is real, and what is possible in society is also real. Space is the incubator not just of multiple trajectories, of each of us and our encounters, but of the *possible*, of the new intersecting trajectories and shared zones of future higher education. Space in its differing and overlapping scales is an inexhaustible resource that humans make for themselves and the medium of their slowly expanding freedoms.

**[The expanded version of the paper is at]**

[link]

**[References]**