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**Global, Nordic and national space and time making 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, simultaneously? We have multiple identities. Many relate to higher education in the city and its hinterland, and a larger region crossing national boundaries, both a Nordic region and the region of European civilization, perhaps ‘the West’. And the nation is always there.

**[outline of webinar slide]**

That is my topic today. The multi-scalar space of higher education and knowledge, and how we conceive and practise space.

**[higher education is a *multi-scalar* sector]**

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’. We argued that cross-border activity was growing rapidly, and 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 this. We also pushed back against the idea that the advance of globalization in higher education meant the weakening of the nation-state. As we saw it, nation-states continued to define, regulate and fund the sector. Local, national, regional, global were in play.

**[Expanding global scale in science]**

Since the 2002 publication activity in the global scale has expanded by leaps and bounds, especially through global communication, the flow of ideas and knowledge and networked research. A global science system has evolved, based on papers in English and collaboration and co-authorship. This overshadows national science systems, which must connect with the global circuit to reach the cutting edge. The global system is inclusive but also exclusive. It screens out knowledge in languages other than English, and all indigenous knowledge. At the same time it brings many emerging nations into global science. Global science is one of the tools of nation-building. Here we find that global and national activity are interdependent, and the relationship between them can be either or both of zero sum and positive sum.

**[limitations of methodological nationalism]**

Nevertheless, in the higher education studies field, in which people work often to national policy problems and in institutions framed by national policy, the old standard methodological nationalism is still pervasive. Methodological nationalism is ‘the belief that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world’. 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’.

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

Developments since 2002 confirm that we work in a multiscalar sector. Yet the character of space and scale is still not well understood. In a summary of literature on international and global higher education Jenny Lee and Bjorn Stensaker (2021) note three differing propositions that recur frequently: the nation-state remains very important; institutions adapt to global norms; and role of nation-states is declining. So little clarity on the core spatiality.

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

In thinking about that spatiality I draw here on human geography. 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.

**[‘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’.

**[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’. 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. In higher education think of the global schoolhouse in Singapore. Think of NYU’s global university, in which students study for at least one year in New York, Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. Think of 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.

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 in C, constitute each other.

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

For example, in the late 1990s stand-alone ‘e-universities’ failed to attract student customers. A decade later the content-rich MOOC format emerged in domain B and was implemented in domain C, through existing institutions. 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 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. Universities became locked into incentives they would never have chosen.

**[What is making the Nordic scale in higher education?]**

The question that might seem to arise in relation to Nordic higher education is ‘what is Nordic higher education?’ or ‘what do the Nordic systems have in common’. But the question that matters is ‘what does it mean *to make a Nordic space*, a Nordic regional scale in higher education’?

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

But keep in mind when making a Nordic scale in higher education that you cannot expect to control it, not in the longer run anyway. 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. The leading Chinese universities have now 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 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. But the rise of China in turn triggered a shift in US strategy, from global freedom and inclusion to decoupling, selective closure and a fracturing global space in science and technology. The big nation partly dismantled the global.

**[Slower growing Science systems in the period 2000-2020]**

Let’s look in more detail at the worldwide evolution of scientific development. This chart shows the slower growing established science systems, mostly `Euro-American. It compares the rate of growth of science papers with the wealth of countries and the size of the science output, shown by the size of the ball. The Nordic science systems are in green.

**[Fast growing Science systems in the period 2000-2020]**

Now here’s the faster growing systems – most of them relatively new science countries. Three have science papers growing at the incredible rate of 20 per cent a year or more for two decades. 11 of them have per capita incomes below the world average. That’s how plural scientific capacity has become.

**[Multiple scales in higher education]**

I’ll turn now to 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 for us in higher education 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 Nordic, practice the national, see as a state, and so on. The scales vary by scope and proximity.

**[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; and comparison, imitation and differentiation between institutions and countries; the flows of ideas and information; the processes of cross-border connections and movement. *Regionally*, I don’t need to tell you about the importance of Europe. The *local* scale is changing all the time. We make those changes ourselves, 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.

**[Higher education continues to be a nation-building sector]**

*Nationally,* the last three decades have seen an extended process of state and national economy building in much of the world. State building is accompanied by growing demand for higher education and a growing infrastructure and number of student places, meeting the growing demand for tertiary education.

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

The point I want to emphasise, though, is that 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 has a normative centre, the European Commission, though it is always being relativised in a nation-state world. The global scale is different again. It has no normative centre. This is why we cannot tackle climate change. It is impossible to tackle global problems in a nation state dominated world. The global is a space of activity in which higher education institutions, persons and nations do what they will. Yet global science and bibliometrics, and rankings, are powerful informal regulatory systems.

**[Mixing and matching geographical scales]**

A feature of higher education is the way that agents combine the geographic scales and move freely between them – that is, when they have the resources and capabilities to do so. 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 regional or global disciplinary networks. Institutions proclaim a global mission and identity, though research suggests that when push comes to shove, their national identity takes precedence.

**[Is the national scale becoming more important vis a vis the global then it was?]**

Is the national scale becoming more important vis a vis the global then it was? Probably, yes. Is the pan-national region becoming more important vis a vis the other scales? The jury is out. The development of a more a multi-polar world enhances the long-term potentials of regionalisation, with several strong centres. But in the short term this is overshadowed by the drama of the retreat from the high noon of US power, the post-1990 Pax America Anglophone globalisation. Both sides of politics in the US calculate that global openness and inclusion no longer advances the imperial *Empire* of Hardt and Negri. The world, especially China, has both gained from US globalisation and remained stubbornly itself. The Sino-American divide will play out over decades and we also see the all-round reassertion of nation-states and militarisation, advanced by Putin’s dreadful war. I am pessimistic about the willingness of universities to maintain a more global approach than the nation-states that feed them, but no one really knows what spaces will be made in higher education in future.

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

Space is one of the key coordinates of the higher education world, as important as capital, class and imperialism; the hierarchies of ethnicity-race and gender political culture, policy and regulation; language and knowledge. 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.

**[Expect the unexpected!]**

Space is the incubator not just of multiple trajectories, of our encounters, of our relationships, but of the *possible*, of the new intersecting trajectories and shared zones of future higher education. The possible is where hope is found. And space, with its opennesss and its vast potential for agentic activity, including cooperation, has been and will be an incubator of hope. Space in its differing and overlapping scales is an inexhaustible resource that humans make for themselves and the medium of their slowly expanding freedoms.