

**SRHE Newer Researchers Award Final Report**  
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**Global gatherings and digital divides: internationalisation and the digital in higher education**

‘globalisation is made in places. The global is grounded.’ (Massey 2010)

‘the global lies within each site and is small, sensuous, specific, heterogeneous, noncoherent, and cannot be more than patchily modeled.’ (Law 2004)

‘it takes a lot of effort to *make* things international.’ (Lin and Law, 2013)

**Executive summary**

The aim of this research project was to problematise the discourse of ‘internationalisation’ in higher education (Haigh 2014), by drawing on issues of geopolitics and the digital. I took a critical approach to recent imperatives that universities should ‘think global’, incorporating the expansion of ‘digital learning’ (European Commission 2013), by considering how higher education institutions are *made international*, both physically and digitally. In this project I focused particularly on the internationalisation discourse in relation to teaching and learning, as distinct from internationalisation in relation to academic research.

My starting point in the literature was Sidhu and Dall’Alba’s (2011) work on ‘International education and (dis)embodied cosmopolitanisms’, in which the authors critique the education ‘export industry’, arguing that there is a gap between the way international students are represented (disembodied) and student experiences (embodied), which works against the promise of the ‘cosmopolitan’ in international education (abstract p413). I looked at contemporary theories of the ‘cosmopolitan’ (Braidotti 2013), and I drew particularly on Lin and Law’s (2013) work on alternative ‘modes of international’. My research draws on these theoretical approaches in a digital context, addressing what I perceived to be a separation in the literature (and also in institutional practices) between international education and digital education.

I initially worked with, and continued to follow and analyse, an example of a digital geopolitical issue in the sector, in which Coursera, the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) provider found itself subject to US export restrictions in 2014. Whilst the provider had made great claims to a form of ‘open’ digital education in which, ‘...anyone around the world can learn without limits’ (Coursera 2014), export restrictions subsequently led to the company being prohibited from providing courses to ‘sanctioned countries’ (Coursera blog, 2014), meaning the withdrawal of educational ‘services’ from students in Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria. In beginning with this example, my intention was to conduct research which would both problematize the notion of a ‘digital international’, but also to open up new ways of thinking about internationalisation and the digital for a range of academic and non-academic university practitioners.

I worked with the following research questions in this project:

- What work is the term ‘internationalisation’ doing in recent policy and research literature in relation to digital education?
- How might a more nuanced understanding of the ‘digital divide’ and ‘digital inequality’ benefit the development of policy and pedagogy in digital education?
- What can digital and visual research methods contribute to understanding the currency of ‘internationalisation’ in education?

In summary, my aim was to look at the relationship, if any, between the project of 'internationalisation' and digital education; to review policy and practice in this area in terms of 'making things international', and to undertake a visual exploration of 'modes of international'; whether international was 'being done' in a particular way.

### **Methodology**

The main strand of work for this project was an ethnographic study, with a focus on visual methods, of the 2015 'Going Global' conference, hosted by the British Council in London, 'offering an open forum for global leaders of international education to discuss issues facing the international education community' (Going Global 2014). This involved an analysis of the conference's online presence, via its website and social media channels, and observing and 'live fieldnoting' the physical set-up of the conference, by collecting visual data. Key materials selected for analysis were on-site photographs; conference bags and hard copy materials; Twitter images and website material. My aim was to work with a methodological approach which, as Pink (2012) proposes, incorporates, 'visualities, visions and ways of looking that are both online and offline' (p128). A second strand of work involved web-based content and visual analysis of discourses of internationalisation, via the web presences of UK universities and related HE organisations. Although I had initially also intended to conduct a small number of interviews, I decided that additional interview data was not required. I did, however, engage in a number of informal conversations with HE international office staff and with British Council staff. In doing so I was able to test a number of developing ideas.

### **Analysis**

My analysis has been focused on explorations with visual data, including hard copy materials, gathered at Going Global 2015. I took a small number of photographs at the conference, which I posted to a Tumblr feed <http://edresmay.tumblr.com>, but I was also able to collect visual data from the conference Twitter feed #goingglobal2015 and official Flickr account <https://www.flickr.com/photos/going-global/>. I undertook a thematic analysis of Twitter images and compared this with my own photographs and the 'official' photo stream. In doing so, I was looking simultaneously at the construction of the conference and the 'making' of the international in higher education.





### Emerging themes

Themes identified in my analysis for development include the following:

- Conference as media (re)production
- Conference as education business - from venue to dress
- Branding and sponsorship in/of HE - British Council and IELTS
- Global London - a British global - HE tourism (Massey's 2010 'World City')
- English as a global language - IELTS
- Conference as 'collateral reality' (Law 2009)
- International as 'collateral reality'
- Disconnection between international education and the digital
- Dependence on the categories of 'sender' and the 'receiver' in international education

### Project conclusions

The research project has confirmed that there is a continued separation in the discourse around, and approaches to, digital and international education in the sector, where international education continues to be discussed in terms of the campus ('arrival', visas, accommodation) and the 'off-shore' campus (transnational education (TNE)),

meaning that the digital is not always considered in discussions of the international in higher education. Whilst Going Global 2015 was produced as a high quality digital (and political) media event (for example, the conference hosted Jo Johnson's first public engagement as Minister of State for Universities and Science), there was very little to suggest that digital education and the role of digital media was considered to be a significant aspect of international education and the internationalisation agenda.

### **Presentation of work**

I have given three formal presentations to date on the work undertaken for this project:

December 2015 - 'Making things global: exploring visual and digital methods for event ethnography'. SRHE Newer Researchers Conference.

November 2015 - 'Global gatherings and digital divides: internationalisation and the digital in higher education'. Queen Mary University of London, Education seminar series.

April 2015 - 'Internationalisation and the digital'. SRHE International Research and Researchers Network.

### **Publication of work**

I plan to submit two publications from this project, developing the themes of my analysis, explored the presentations outlined above. The first paper will focus on digital/visual methods, working with the theme of 'making things global', and drawing on material gathered from the Going Global 2015 conference. The second will take a theory driven approach to the international and the digital in education, drawing on the literature and website material, working particularly with the example of US export restrictions on MOOCs.

### **Future research**

This project provides a sound basis on which to develop future work and I am actively seeking potential funding streams which might support the development of further ethnographic work in the area of international education in relation to digital education and digital media.

### **Acknowledgements**

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