

“Go West” – The impact of core-periphery differences on student encounters in an international study environment at a Danish university

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As made apparent by its internationalisation strategies, Aarhus University (Denmark) welcomes, indeed almost celebrates, cultural diversity among its students and as such regards the internationalisation of university education as the foundation for the creation of a cosmopolitan (almost verging on borderless) mindset among its students. Also among scholars the development of “intercultural skills” is frequently stated as one of the main goals of international education (Knight 1997, Volet 2003; De Vita 2005). Less attention has, however, been paid towards the structural mechanisms – previous and present – that may impact, even hamper, such commendable aspirations and ideals. In light of this, the paper will explore the ways that ‘cultural encounters’ and meetings with the “other” are experienced and felt by students coming from countries often categorised as peripheral. More specifically, this paper will investigate students’ reflections on the West (the core) and accordingly discuss how such asymmetrical relations impact and shape student encounters.

The paper draws on qualitative data, entailing that it builds its analysis on roughly 35 interviews with students from international study programmes at Aarhus University conducted at different times during their stay abroad. In addition to this participant observation has been done at various locations, meaning that I have observed and interacted with students inside as well as outside the classroom. This paper is especially interested in the international students who link a geographical move and a degree from a Danish university with a move up a (perceived) global hierarchy of countries (Pajo 2008) and in line with this regard cross-border movement as a way to acquire various forms of capital (social and cultural). The target group of this paper is students coming from outside a European context (Asia and Africa) as well as students from Eastern European countries. Considering Aarhus University as a ‘meeting place’ for students from all over the world (Wilken and Ginnerskov forthcoming), this paper will explore the ways that such core-periphery relations impact how this highly diverse student body meet, interact, construct identities and negotiate distinctions between ‘self’ and ‘other’.

In this light, Aarhus University is not merely a random 'meeting place' for students from all over the world, meaning that it is not a neutral study destination on the map but injected with a certain value and meaning by the mobile students. Thus, in this paper I will discuss how students' thoughts of Denmark and a degree from Aarhus University seems to be connected to perceptions of a global hierarchical order and how Aarhus University enters into a broader discourse on the West, notions of 'the good life' and in connection to this the Nordic welfare model.

Theoretically and methodologically the project is inspired by the thoughts of Pierre Bourdieu, which entails that the paper draws on a theoretical framework that is based on relationalism as opposed to substantialism (Bourdieu 1989, 1998). Where the latter approach asserts that the basic units or actors of social inquiry are more or less static substances or essences, a relational mode of thinking, on the other hand, "does not posit essences but relations that constitute the ostensible essences in the first place" (Go 2013). In our case this entails that cultural encounters do not take place in a vacuum, but that the students' experiences of such encounters to a great extent are determined by the actors positioning in social space. Following this, I will take previous and present global power relations into consideration, and discuss the ways that these might influence the way that students interact, make internal categorisations and self/other-distinctions and ultimately their potential for developing so-called intercultural skills.

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