

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Offshoring Responsibility: Transnational Higher Education and Risk in the Neoliberal Imaginary

Lee Rensimer¹

¹*University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, The United States of America*

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Abstract: The contemporary British university is characterised as competitive and risk-taking in response to decades of market-based reforms. In the neoliberal imaginary, risk is framed through a narrow organisational lens (e.g. reputational damage, capital loss) and delinked from responsibility (e.g. students' futures, contribution to the public good). This unravelling of risk and responsibility is amplified in transnational higher education (TNHE), as the latter is effectively 'offshored' to foreign hosts. This study revisits the incorporation of risk-management in UK higher education, tracing how risk came to be a virtue and dominant organisational logic governing university decision-making. Applying this conceptual framing to TNHE activities in the United Arab Emirates, it examines the normative ways senior leaders at transnational UK universities frame risk and the virtuous role it plays in university strategizing. The findings raise critical questions on the conflicting commitments of 'responsibilised' universities in the neoliberal era, particularly in the transnational context.

Paper: *"We took the decision to invest and take a risk. Maybe that sets us apart from other institutions."*[\[1\]](#)

Transnational higher education (TNHE) agendas are governed by a normalised understanding of risk-taking, seen as a virtuous distinguishing characteristic of successful universities. In this application, risk is narrowly defined as a self-protective concern with reputational damage and financial loss to the institution, omitting students, the sector and society from its framing. This paper examines how risk is operationalized within a marketised paradigm of HE governance and advances the idea of offshoring responsibility, thus elucidating an aspect of the neoliberal imaginary hitherto under-examined. Drawing on empirical research on UK TNHE developments in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it interrogates the neoliberal logics governing university decision-making and the elevation of risk-taking as a virtue in higher education

The emergence of market logics in UK higher education were attended by policy discourses which transformed how universities managed themselves; part of this reorganising and 'responsibilising'

project is the introduction of risk as an organising logic of accountability under the tenets of New Public Management (Olszen & Peters, 2005). Introduced to the UK HE sector through HEFCE's 'Good Practice in Risk Management' agenda in 2001, universities adopted managerial frameworks taken from the private sector to broadly assess institutional and societal risks to their governance, quality, reputation and finances, thereby making them more accountable, professionally managed, and importantly, develop an 'appetite for risk' (Power, Scheytt, Soin, & Sahlin, 2009). The consequences with relevance to this paper are twofold. Firstly, HEFCE encouraged universities to capitalise on risk in accordance with organisational ambitions (Huber, 2010). Secondly, and informed by the normative thrust of the first, HEFCE advanced a tripartite model for conceptualising risk which identified and disaggregated risk by its impact on the institution, the HE sector and the wider society and economy. The effect of this exercise was the concentration of focus on perceptions of university conduct and how this informed external metrics (e.g. rankings, evaluations) (Power et al., 2009). Reputational risk had, in effect, become the dominant organisational logic governing university decision-making.

Driven to increased competition for reputational gain and growth opportunities in light of the changing funding environment, the sector saw an explosion of new revenue-producing activities and modes of delivery in the UK and overseas 'markets'. The rise of TNHE as one of those revenue streams is evidenced by its scale and complexity. With 82% of British universities delivering programmes overseas in some capacity (HE Global, 2016), the organisational ambitions of universities across the sector had evidently risen to perceive their competition, and thus their risk, on a global scale. The limited scholarship on TNHE concentrates in managerial and organisational studies, and thus approaches risk and risk management from an institutional perspective. The consensus within this literature identifies TNHE as a risk-prone activity with a higher likelihood of 'market failure' than traditional delivery in the UK (Healey, 2015; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). What is striking is the consistent framing of risk as reputational damage, and secondarily financial loss. Evident in this literature is the near-total omission of sectoral (damage to the UK HE brand) or societal risk (economic and social impact on local stakeholders) to the 'host' country. Under the narrow and primarily transactional framings of TNHE, those wider responsibilities, which might broadly include educational futures, inclusion, innovation or other public goods (Marginson, 2011; Pusser, 2006) are effectively 'offshored' in the same way the externalities of offshore manufacturing are exported and made the responsibility of foreign governments.

Known for its transnational flows of capital, people and brand-name international institutions, the UAE is a TNHE 'hotspot' with an expansive portfolio of international degree providers servicing mainly its majority expatriate population. The UK dominates this landscape with the most international branch campuses (IBCs) and highest proportion of enrolled students among its competitors (Garrett, Kinser, Lane, & Merola, 2016), delivering mostly taught degrees in professional and vocational fields. To understand how large TNHE endeavours are assembled at the intersections of university ambition, resource need and market opportunity, senior leaders at three British IBCs in the UAE and their home universities in the UK were interviewed, asking how executive decisions were made prior to the establishment of their offshore campuses and how leaders imagined the role of an IBC in their organisational vision. The common thread in their responses was a valorisation of risk-taking dispositions which they believed distinguished them from other institutions; critically, their framing of risk was invariably limited to reputational and financial damage to their institutions. There was also a shared narrative of desire to transform their universities into global organisations, establishing links between aspiration and a requisite appetite for risk.

These findings, whilst in keeping with TNHE literature and market paradigms governing how risk is operationalised, prompt critical questions on the 'responsibilisation' of universities where stakeholders transcend national educational spaces. This offshoring of accountability sits in tension with the more noble rationales for TNHE, notably enabling access, increasing local capacity and stemming 'brain drain' in overseas host markets (HE Global, 2016). In light of the dominance of managerialist and market lenses in TNHE research, this study draws attention to the need for more critical approaches to conceptualising the globalisation and redistribution of risk in commercialised education, including novel ways of theorising risk and responsibility beyond the analytical trappings of scalar models and internal/external or home/host binaries.

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[1] From the Marketing Director for a UK university with a broad portfolio of TNHE and international branch campuses