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International student migration and the postcolonial heritage of European Higher Education:
Perspectives from Portugal and the UK

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Abstract: Whilst the presence of international students from so-called ‘developing’ countries has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in European higher education, few scholars have explored the underlying post/colonial trajectories that facilitate student migration to many European countries today. In this paper, we seek to critically engage with the postcolonial heritage of European higher education and the ways in which it informs student migration in today’s era of neoliberal globalisation. A three-fold approach to reading postcolonial heritage of higher education is applied, which comprises its historical, epistemic and experiential (or ‘lived’) dimensions. To achieve this, firstly, this paper provides a close examination of existing postcolonial theory in higher education studies. Secondly, and adding to this, it draws on qualitative research with student migrants in Portugal and the UK to show how the postcolonial heritage of European higher education is negotiated in everyday contexts and may become a formative element in students’ identities.

Paper: Research background and aim

Over recent years, there has been a growing interest in applying postcolonial theory to address the complex trajectories that facilitate student migration from so-called ‘developing’ countries to Europe and the global ‘west’, and to explore students’ social and educational experiences ‘abroad’ (Madge *et al.* 2009; Ling *et al.* 2014; Stein & Andreotti 2016). Drawing on this progressive scholarly work and borrowing from the field of critical heritage studies, the aim of this paper is to explore some dimensions of ‘postcolonial heritage of higher education’ in two European countries, Portugal and the UK. In doing so, it seeks to chart the contested and uneven fields of power/knowledge international student-migrants navigate and inhabit in postcolonial educational contexts.

The notion of ‘postcolonial heritage’ is widely associated with ‘dissonant’ material manifestations and ‘uneasy’ memories of power/violence exerted by colonial oppressors over their colonial subjects (Gilbin 2015). In the context of international HE, the problematisation of such heritage has recently

erupted in the 'Rhodes must fall' student movement in South Africa, as well as various calls for 'decolonising' curricula in western universities (Knudsen & Andersen 2019). This paper employs the notion of 'postcolonial heritage' to refer to a complex set of processes, policies, practices and structures of feeling that permeate international student migration to European (and wider 'western') HE today.

Firstly, we relate the notion of heritage to the historical dimensions of European HE expansion as a modern colonial project which was exported to, and imposed on, the racially, culturally and geographically distant 'Other'. More than just a historical treatise about the genesis of higher education in former European colonial territories, this understanding of heritage requires a critical engagement with western/Eurocentric conceptions of HE as something that continues to 'migrate' itself as a commodity or (neo-colonial) 'soft power' in the age of neoliberal globalisation (Lomer 2017).

Secondly, we conceptualise the *epistemic heritage* of European HE as a set of powerful knowledge systems, constructed in contrast to, and conflict with, non-European 'intellectual traditions'. Today, the mastering of such knowledge systems continues to be imposed on student migrants from overseas, and informs much of the deficit and 'adjustment' approaches that dominate 'internationalisation' discourses in western, and predominantly Anglophone university settings (Marginson 2014).

Thirdly, we propose the idea of *experiential* (or 'lived') *heritage* to make sense of the ways in which students form, interpret, and negotiate their own cultural identities as temporary migrants or members of established minority communities within postcolonial HE contexts. Students' lived experiences reveal complex processes in which postcolonial heritage is being constantly (and often tacitly) constructed, reinvented and performed through everyday social practices and cultural encounters.

Importantly, we consider these three dimensions of 'postcolonial heritage' not as separate entities, but as strongly interconnected and interdependent. Put together, they form an original and useful conceptual approach which adds new insights to the study of student migration and the internationalisation of HE more widely.

Methodology

Whilst much of this paper is conceptual in scope, in order to shed light on the experiential or 'lived' dimensions of postcolonial heritage, we draw on 26 biographical interviews with student migrants enrolled in degree programmes at universities in Portugal and the UK, two countries with a long-standing, yet notably different, colonial heritage. In doing so, we explore some of the ways in which student migrants project their social, cultural and educational identities against the wider canvas of their shared colonial heritage. The interviews were conducted over a period of five years and were part of three separate research projects. What all three projects had in common was the focus on the lived experiences of student migrants in Portugal and the UK, and exploring the ways in which they construct their social, cultural and educational identities at different stages in their studies. The notion of (lived) 'postcolonial heritage' emerged as a strong meta-narrative when revisiting students' biographical stories, and forms the core part of this analysis. The interviews were planned and conducted following the ethical code of practice of the University of Hull and the University of Porto.

They were anonymised, transcribed and coded, and subjected to narrative analysis.

Preliminary findings and conclusions

Our analysis of the historical and epistemic dimensions of the postcolonial heritage of HE largely confirms the prevailing influence of hegemonic Eurocentrism within neoliberal and neo-colonial HE contexts (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). However, such one-way flows of power and hegemony are being increasingly challenged by critical, and frequently 'grassroot', approaches to HE internationalisation. Indeed, the critical engagement with the postcolonial heritage of HE provides ample opportunities to mobilise ambivalent, hybrid and potentially 'uneasy' cultural encounters which, in turn, can advance higher learning, teaching, and scholarship. Likewise, the narratives of student migrants reveal a more nuanced picture in which international HE becomes a meaningful site for the negotiation of postcolonial heritage and the continual (re-)centring of student identities in ambivalent cultural encounters and epistemic contexts. Rather than rehearsing prevailing narratives of dependency, adaptation or assimilation, students' voices speak of agency, resilience, and reflexivity when it comes to navigating these contested, yet often strangely familiar, spaces of knowledge and power.

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