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Universities as Landscapes

Richard Budd¹

¹Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

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Abstract:

This paper suggests that viewing universities as landscapes can be helpful in creating a more holistic, relational view of them than higher education scholarship currently affords. The term 'landscape' is commonly invoked in scholarship on the sector, but it is rarely defined. Scholars in geography, though, have worked with this idea for some time, and Mitchell (2003, p. 792) describes them as 'a substantive, material reality, a place lived, a world produced and transformed, a commingling of nature and society that is struggled over and in.' This highlights landscapes as material and cultural spaces that we inhabit, being shaped by them and shaping them, and that individual landscapes are distinct in their histories, topographies, populations, formal and informal structures. It will be argued that, by simultaneously considering these dimensions of individual universities, and comparing them within and between countries, offers an opportunity to make useful contributions to higher education scholarship.

Paper:

Introduction

This paper suggests that viewing universities as landscapes can be helpful in creating a more holistic, relational view of them. While the term 'landscape' is commonly invoked in scholarship on the sector, it is rarely defined. Universities operate in a 'regulatory landscape' (BIS 2015), that is also a 'globalized landscape' (Becher and Trowler 2001), and an 'increasingly competitive landscape' (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). Within this, staff and students negotiate 'pedagogical landscape' (Bidarra and Rusman 2017), within an unequal 'socio-political landscape' (Gray and Nicholas 2019), with the array of options presenting 'landscapes of choice' (Pásztor and Wakeling 2018, Baker 2019), amid a 'financial landscape' of funding arrangements (Clark *et al.* 2019). The use of the landscape in these cases is helpful because it draws attention to a breadth and plurality of interconnected policies, disparate approaches to teaching, social identity dynamics, and issues related to student debt and the graduate labour market. However, there is a concomitant danger of landscapes serving as an indeterminate catch-all that encompasses everything without identifying, separating out, and then analysing how its individual threads might be woven together.

Landscapes

Wylie (2007) describes how geographers, in their view of landscapes, consider how the material, cultural, and regulative are interrelated. This calls attention to what they see as a crucial point: that human activity is as much shaped by the physical features of the world we live in as by our continual (re-) shaping of it. In this sense, landscapes should not be viewed as simply artistic or idealised panoramas – static representations of scenes from which the viewer is distinct – but as dynamic assemblages within which we are embedded (Olwig 2004). Summarising this view (Mitchell, 2003, p.792) defines a landscape as ‘a substantive, material reality, a place lived, a world produced and transformed, a commingling of nature and society that is struggled over and in.’ These scholars therefore highlight how we *inhabit* landscapes that are distinct in their histories, topographies, populations, formal and informal structures, and which sit alongside – and interact with – neighbouring landscapes (e.g. urban/rural, climatic, regulative, affluent/disadvantaged etc).

Universities as Landscapes

Viewing universities as landscapes in this way offers an opportunity to consider multiple dimensions alongside one another, rather than piecemeal. It is self-evident that all universities are unique, with their varying histories, locations, disciplinary and social compositions, partnerships, and so on (see e.g. Brennan and Cochrane 2019). What is more difficult to assert to date, at least in a way that is conceptually framed, is how that uniqueness can be analysed, and compared. It is suggested here that landscapes offer a potential solution to this.

In terms of the disparate strands of research on life in universities, the steady creep of managerial culture is well-documented (Sabri 2011, Shields and Watermeyer 2018), and there is broad evidence of the ways that identity dimensions are a strong factor in the experiences of staff and students (Bathmaker *et al.* 2016, Bhopal 2016, Jackson and Sundaram 2018). This is a central concern, and one which will play out differently as universities each recruit from marginally or very different constituencies, both internationally and domestically, based on their profile and location (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). We also know that how universities engage with policy varies, depending on the histories and the balance of research and teaching that contribute to their broader organisational cultures (van der Velden 2012, Lacatus 2013).

In terms of the material, some scholars have written of the architectural legacies and trends in higher education (Dober 1996, Coulson *et al.* 2015), and there are strong indications that university buildings need to be considered within the political economies of place (Whyte 2017). There is also work on the ‘flows’ of university campuses (Greene and Penn 1997), or how the use of green spaces can be gendered (Speake *et al.* 2013). There is, though, relatively little work in this area in the main, particularly which examines the processes of commissioning, and the effects (or effectiveness) of, the expansions and maintenance of university estates (Van Heur 2010, Harris-Huemmert 2019).

Opportunities and Challenges

In review, we can see that scholarship does unpacking the many ways in which universities can compare. However, what is arguably missing is a systematic exploration of how these different aspects combine and intersect within and between individual universities. Glimpses of what is possible are evident from recent research which shows how culture and gender intersect in the ways

that students utilise their universities' shared spaces (Alzeer 2018), or how universities' capacity (or willingness) to engage in widening participation can be mediated by their teaching/research orientation (Boliver *et al.* 2018). Other work has connected university spaces and national and local policies. Brooks *et al.* (2016) found that universities may improve their student unions' facilities in the interests of campus beautification, but that there can be a parallel pressure to deflect SU efforts towards neoliberal concerns with delivering student voice and the NSS scores, and away from their traditional political activity.

Both methodologically and ethically, thinking about universities as landscapes might require us to do things a little differently. As a perspective which requires interdisciplinary work, from architecture to anthropology, history to sociology, a range of research designs will no doubt be appropriate, and these will need to be combined. Much the research literature on higher education anonymises universities, for ethical (or reputational) reasons, reducing them to mission group membership, city or semi-rural locations, or their emphasis on research and teaching. What this masks (other than their identities!) is the ways in which the landscape of a university in the round (mal-) functions. Oxford and Cambridge, for example, are alike and yet not, as are US state universities, and so on. How are these universities different within and between countries, (beyond the reductive pictures offered by metrics), and how does it matter?

In order to undertake research that does universities as landscapes justice, we may have to do things differently, to combine diverse perspectives. This will be difficult, but higher educational scholarship could benefit greatly.

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