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Approaching "Meaningful" Internationalisation: Unpacking Policies and Practises of Internationalisation in Denmark, Finland, and Germany

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract: This paper explores five cases of internationalisation of higher education from Denmark, Finland and Germany through a lense of meaningfulness. Meaningful often refers to something that has significance, relevance, purpose, or value. Just like the ideas of a meaningful university, internationalisation of higher education is contested terrain. For the past decades, internationalisation has been a buzzword in university strategies. However, in an era with Brexit and neo-national tendencies in many European countries and the USA, internationalisation through mobility and language (English Medium Instruction) has come under pressure. Contradictory political signals regarding student mobility, language of instruction, and other 'instruments' of internationalisation call for critical research into how internationalisation is conducted and experienced by stakeholders. Across the five cases, we explore contemporary complexities of internationalisation and discuss what makes internationalisation meaningful, how and for whom. An observation that permeates all five cases is the relationality of meaningfulness of internationalisation.

Paper: Background

In this paper, we analyse cases of work in progress from three countries (Finland, Denmark and Germany) to explore contemporary complexities of internationalisation and discuss what makes internationalisation meaningful, how, and for whom. Meaningful is often used to denote something that has significance, relevance, purpose, or value. In an era of Brexit and neo-national tendencies in many European countries and the USA, internationalisation through mobility has come under pressure (Lee 2020). Internationalisation is politically expected to lead to higher quality of higher education (de Wit & Knight 1999; de Wit 2019)), but it is unclear how transnational mobility (Wihlborg 2009) or English medium instruction (Fabricius et al. 2017; Hultgren 2014) per se leads to increased quality. Consequently, for teachers instrumentalist approaches to internationalisation, emphasising measurements of student mobility rather than the content of the process of internationalisation, can lead to a sense of meaninglessness (Tange 2009). For students, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach towards internationalisation that emphasises transnational mobility and does not address opportunities of internationalisation (such as experiencing diversity and developing a multicultural understanding and global citizenship) may lead to meaninglessness.

Our approach and the five cases

The cases in point stem from research on internationalisation from perspectives of mobility and its implications to language, marketing, international experience, global citizenship and academic recruitments (Haapakoski & Pashby 2017; Almeida 2020). We do not proceed from one definition of meaningfulness, rather we explore what meaningfulness of internationalisation may entail in each case.

In Finnish higher education, internationalisation has until recently been operationalised as the use of English in the academia. However, it receives its meaning in the political constellations at any given time through the dynamics of English and national languages, thus giving emergence to an analysis of meaningfulness as interplay of the national and international.

The three cases within Danish higher education include 1. An analysis of marketing videos of a Danish university, exploring discourses of targeting domestic and international students, 2. Ethnographic research among international students, investigating how incoming mobility enables meaningful/less interaction, and 3. An analysis of qualitative interviews with ‘international’ academics, of how the ‘international’ is ascribed meaning and is negotiated in the daily practice of being an academic.

The meaning of studying abroad for developing global citizenship is analysed from interviews with students from Germany who studied in different European countries. The main question is whether and how studying abroad can be “more” than only language acquisition and job preparation.

Findings: “Meaningfulness” unpacked as directional and relational

A common theme of all cases is that meaningfulness was construed as directional (local – global, national – international etc.; see articles in Jones et al. 2016) and relational, or mutually entangled. In the case of language in Finnish higher education, internationalisation received “global” and “national” meanings based on the dynamics between English as the language of internationalisation, Finnish as the national language of the majority, and Swedish as the somewhat controversial national language of the minority.

In the case of marketing materials, internationalisation was presented differently to Danish and international audiences, and the absence of internationalisation aspects in the Danish marketing videos suggests that the institution may view the meaning of internationalisation differently, when targeting Danish prospective students. The case of incoming mobility showed possibilities for intercultural meaningful interaction but also raised questions of global hierarchies in education. In the case of the ‘international’ academics in Denmark, the experience and understanding of teaching and its attachment to culture and place emerged as an interesting preliminary result.

The study from Germany shows that universities can offer spaces to challenge a Eurocentric way of seeing and relating to the world through learning in an international classroom. Particularly, interpersonal encounters among international students created an awareness to question students’ assumptions and consider alternative perspectives. These encounters can, however, also reinforce Western epistemologies and subjectivities.

Conclusions

The element of relationality and physicality (Leander & al. 2010; Larsen & Johnson 2012) for creating meaningful internationalisation was a main theme in our cases. In future work, it remains to be analysed, how these different (relational and physical) spaces inform, shape and impact each other, and how they may (not) create meaning with one another. Ultimately, we find ourselves asking basic questions concerning the meaning of internationalisation: Who creates meaning, how and for whom? How do personal, professional and academic meanings intertwine? How does relational space feature in this connecting-with-each-other for meaning-making? Are there meanings in the invisible/in-between spaces?

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