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Surfacing 'Southern' perspectives on student engagement with internationalisation: doctoral theses as alternative forms of knowledge (0581)

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'Contemporary universities are powerful institutions, interlinked on a global scale; but they embed a narrow knowledge system that reflects and reproduces social inequalities on a global scale' (Connell, 2017).

Abstract

This paper explores how knowledge represented in doctoral theses may be constructed as a source of 'Southern' knowledge on international education and aims to surface some of the ways in which knowledge generated by doctoral students could illustrate new perspectives on internationalisation, particularly for the students' own country contexts. The research conducted a search of all UK doctoral theses from 2008 to 2018 in the EThOS repository of the British Library, focusing on theses on internationalisation and then conducted a thematic analysis. In addition to questioning whether thesis knowledge constitutes powerful or empowering knowledge for the student and the Southern cultures they come from, the research indicates that the doctoral theses both reproduced Western knowledge but also generated some new perspectives on methodological and thematic constructions of internationalisation. The paper highlights hierarchies of knowledge, questioning whether postcolonial encounters through the PhD can generate knowledge that builds Southern perspectives on internationalisation.

Keywords: student engagement with internationalisation; southern knowledge; doctoral knowledge

Background and aims

This paper explores ways of surfacing alternative sources of knowledge on postgraduate student engagement with internationalisation. Here, the knowledge represented in doctoral theses on student engagement with internationalisation is presented as a form of 'Southern' knowledge, which Connell (2007) defines as *'[k]nowledge generated in the colonial encounter'*. Southern knowledge refers to knowledge that is marginalised and excluded by the dominance of the Western canon of a privileged set of texts whose interpretation and reinterpretation defines a field (Connell 2007, 4). Of course, the concepts of North and South are crude dichotomies, since, as Tuhiwai Smith argues, what counts as 'Western' research is based on 'an archive of knowledge and systems, rules and values' which stretch beyond the boundaries of Western science (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 44).

Despite the fact that many doctoral students, particularly international students, carry out their research on internationalisation, this knowledge is rarely surfaced as a coherent body of knowledge from which the international higher education community can learn. Doctoral theses are consulted and quoted mainly by other doctoral students who use this knowledge to develop their own theses, which, ironically, then join this largely marginalised body of knowledge. Doctoral work and engagement, particularly by international doctoral students, is often seminal to the advancement of knowledge in

the Western academy, through joint publications and support for the research of senior academics, but it is rarely given the status and acknowledgement it deserves.

This paper aims to surface some of the doctoral knowledge on postgraduate student engagement with internationalisation by carrying out an analysis of the doctoral theses contained in the British Library repository EThOS, which is a searchable open access collection of all the doctoral theses completed in UK universities, currently numbering around half a million theses. The aim of the paper is to use this under-consulted resource as a body of knowledge through which to discover how doctoral students engage with internationalisation through their own research. In addition to this, it aims to question whether doctoral thesis knowledge constitutes powerful or empowering knowledge (Young, 1971) for the student and for the Southern cultures they come from. This raises the question of whether international students engaging in doctoral research on internationalisation are reproducing the knowledge of the Western context in which they study or whether they are enabled to generate new perspectives drawing on the knowledge of their home contexts.

The generation, spread and use of knowledge has embedded forms of inequalities and hierarchies. Connell notes that ‘a universal form of knowledge cannot be based on the experience of a privileged minority alone’ (2011, 1372) but it is the case that some forms of knowledge are valued more than others. Connell notes that ‘only knowledge produced on a planetary scale is adequate to support the self-understanding of societies now forcibly being reshaped on a planetary scale’ (2007, vii). Despite the fact that the greatest global issues we are facing need to be approached collectively, the huge knowledge base present in the Global South (Becker, 2017) still struggles to find its voice.

In the case of the doctoral encounter, previous research is limited in this area but a notable exception to this is Singh and Meng’s (2013) research which suggests that the knowledge generated by Chinese research students could make an original contribution to knowledge relating to Chinese languages and theories. Their paper uses a similar methodology to the research that underpins this paper (see below) by analysing a smaller number (n=15) of doctoral theses supported by interviews. They note, crucially for the argument of this paper: ‘It might be assumed, naively or otherwise, that the theoretical knowledge of international students from non-western or non-English speaking countries would automatically be used alongside relevant western theories. However, this is not the case’ (Singh and Meng 2013, 910). This research aims to construct doctoral theses as a particular form of knowledge, one that comes into existence in the colonial encounter, sometimes keeping to the restricted codes of colonised knowledge but also sometimes presenting critique and deconstruction of dominant forms of knowledge.

The research

A growing number of countries are developing and improving access to their doctoral research repositories (Australia, Canada, China, South Africa and USA to name but a few) and this huge comparative and open access data set could provide a means by which ‘Southern’ knowledge might be surfaced. The research carried out for this paper conducted a systematic search of the UK doctoral theses in the EThOS repository of the British Library, focusing on those researching student engagement with internationalisation. EThOS electronically houses all of the doctoral theses written by students in UK universities and currently contains electronic (or scanned versions) of almost half a million doctoral theses. The main unit of analysis in this initial study was the abstract of the theses.

The research fell into three phases (see Appendix 1 for a table presenting the three phases). Firstly, a search for theses written in the decade 2008 to 2018 focusing on student engagement with

internationalisation was carried out which generated 322 theses. Secondly, irrelevant items were excluded from the analysis. Only theses that were related to internationalisation and research that was conducted by all students (international or UK) either in an international context or about internationalisation in HE in the UK were considered. Internationalisation at school-level topics were also excluded. The final data set consisted of 94 doctoral theses. Thirdly, the data was analysed using a categorisation and coding approach and coding focused on titles; countries in which research was conducted; researched topics, issues related to the main research topics (based on vocabulary used by researchers in their abstracts); any literature mentioned in the abstract; research methods. There was also a closer analysis of particular theses' titles, abstracts and some main theses where clarification was sought. A systematic literature search was also carried out in order to explore the related research fields.

The use of open access repositories of digital data and research on secondary data sources is an approach which is becoming more prevalent as these data sets grow and become more accessible to all (Watermeyer and Montgomery, 2018). Secondary data analysis, also known as meta-analysis (Glass, 1976) is now viewed as its own form of empiricism, and it follows a systematic approach using rigorous evaluative steps (Johnstone 2014). As data from large scale primary quantitative and qualitative studies face requirements to be accessible online beyond the immediate research teams, secondary research approaches aiming to exploit the rich existing data sets have begun to be more widespread (Howell-Major and Savin Baden 2011).

Findings

Patterns emerged from the analysis of the doctoral theses and the most prominent of these were the geographies of student engagement with internationalisation; methodologies and theory; and constructions of internationalisation, the latter being drawn from the analysis of the topics and themes that emerged from the data. Appendix 2 shows the list of nodes that were formed from the data analysis and Appendix 3 shows the map constructed from the emerging themes and topics.

The geographic and spatial locations of research in the context of international higher education are complex and influenced by hierarchies, power and class (Donnelly 2015); international education in particular is becoming more '*spatially differentiated*' (Waters 2006, 1050). As the doctorates were all carried out in UK universities, it is unsurprising to find that a large number of these focused on internationalisation in UK Higher Education. Of the 94 theses analysed, 34 of them investigated internationalisation in the UK or international students in the UK. Much of this research was carried out by international students themselves and covered international students' experiences in UK higher education.

Where the theses were written by international students, they also often carried out research on their own higher education systems, with a broad spread of the theses over different continents and across 38 different countries of the globe; the theses examined internationalisation of higher education in African countries, the Americas and Australia, across the Asian continent and Europe. A small proportion of the theses took a comparative angle, but all of these compared their own higher education systems with one or (rarely) two others. Only on rare occasions did the theses explore the higher education systems of international contexts different from the doctoral candidate's own national context, and in these examples, it tended to be an international doctoral student exploring the UK context.

In some ways the theses provide a rich picture of the spread of research in internationalisation across so many different countries. However, the geographical contexts and directions of the theses analysed

here are indicative of the uneven circulation of knowledge and the limitations of internationalisation. The predominance of inward focus on the UK experience of internationalisation in the UK doctoral theses, combined with the fact that international students tended to focus on their own higher education systems, both point to the fact that engagement with internationalisation in this example shows ‘a pattern of quasi-globalisation’ (Connell 2007, 218). Whilst international students have come to the UK to research internationalisation, the focus is narrow and either relates to the UK or to their own country. Connell notes that ‘Social scientists working in the periphery have a strong orientation to the world centres of their disciplines in the metropole’ (2007, 217) and the tendency for Northern knowledge to dominate is persistent. Whilst it is the case that scholars from the periphery have agency (Connell 2007, 217)), the structures of institutions such as universities and the cultures of ‘the doctorate’ and supervisory pedagogies remain influential.

In terms of the theoretical positions taken by the theses, it was particularly interesting to see the predominance of Western theory used by the international students as a lens on their non-western educational contexts. It was also the case that those exploring the UK context used dominant western theory and theorists. This did not emerge strongly from the search of the abstracts (see Appendix 2) with only a small number of the theses’ abstracts mentioning theory and theorists (Bourdieu being the most commonly referenced theorist). However, as part of an examination of the main theses in the third phase of the analysis it was seen that a sample of the theses supported this suggestion, with many theses relying on concepts commonly associated with Western theory such as social capital, global citizenship or communities of practice. This requires further and more detailed exploration which is not within the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

There are possibilities offered for developing Southern knowledge and perspectives in the doctoral encounter but this is dependent on the capacity of the participants, and most specifically on the dominant supervisor, being open to the work of ‘mediation and negotiation’ which De Sousa Santos describes as ‘intercultural translation’ (De Sousa Santos 2014, 222). This translation is a collective intellectual process which would involve not just individual doctoral supervisors but the whole academy in rethinking the status of doctoral knowledge. Other major theoretical issues are raised by this, as De Sousa’s intercultural translations are based on the idea of the impossibility of a general theory because without this denial of universalism, intercultural translation remains a colonial kind of work no matter how post-colonial it claims to be (De Sousa Santos 2014, 227).

Despite these limitations, the research sheds light on the ways in which this largely marginalised body of knowledge can constitute different accounts, epistemologies and ontologies of student engagement with internationalisation. There are further questions to be asked of this sort of data, particularly with reference to the forms and sources of the theories used in the theses and also the sorts of questions asked. A Southern approach may ask different sorts of questions as in the case of Tuhwai’s work on decolonisation of methodologies which asks about the role of social science itself in oppressing communities’ knowledge (2012). The approach in this research also provides a potential model for further comparative analysis of bodies of doctoral knowledge, given that a growing number of countries are developing and improving access to their doctoral research repositories (Australia, Canada, China, South Africa and USA to name but a few). This huge comparative and open access data set could provide a means by which ‘Southern’ knowledge might be surfaced and research carried out in the colonial encounter of the doctoral thesis could illuminate many issues including student engagement with internationalisation.

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