

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0301

Thu 12 Dec 2019

10:30 - 11:00

Complicit Reproductions in the Global South: Courting World Class Universities and Global Rankings

Jack Lee¹, Rajani Naidoo¹

¹*University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: International Perspectives and context (IPC)

Abstract: The proliferation of rankings has led to vigorous debates about world-class universities (WCUs) and convergence in higher education. Specifically, the narrow metrics of rankings celebrate research and reputation. Many policymakers argue that WCUs are essential to a country's economic competitiveness. Although rankings attract scrutiny, their uptake in the Global South receives little attention. Through policy analysis, we demonstrate that policymakers in Malaysia and Kazakhstan are complicit in amplifying the power of rankings. Theories of colonialism (Alatas, 1956) and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986) guide our comparative analysis. We argue for a more nuanced view of domination beyond the binary division of global pressures and local passivity.

Alatas, S. H. (1956). Some fundamental problems of colonialism. *Eastern World*, November.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In G. Richardson, *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. NY: Greenwood.

Paper: Complicit Reproductions in the Global South: Courting World Class Universities and Global Rankings

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the discourse on world-class universities (WCUs) has permeated many domains of higher education as stakeholders attempt to define, interpret, and evaluate the apex of higher learning (Hazelkorn, 2017). This discourse transcends institutional differences and cultural contexts remarkably well to capture both the imaginations and anxieties of policymakers and institutional leaders. While some institutional leaders may lament the widespread use of ranking as an indicator of quality, many others are quick to tout their institutions' performances in the latest league tables. National policymakers may also have reservations about a global standard in

assessment, yet many are eager to judge other higher education systems and foreign institutions via league tables. These contradictions between rhetoric and practice seldom appear in the literature on WCU, which focuses on methodological problems in ranking universities rather than the ubiquitous use of league tables to steer policymaking.

The discourse on WCUs illustrates three broad streams of concern: clinical inquiry, practical guidance, and existential angst. Which methodology can accurately measure excellence? How can policies and strategies create and sustain world-class institutions? What constitutes a world-class university? Are we a world-class university? These questions ultimately reinforce rankings as the most visible instrument in the comparison of universities worldwide.

This paper focuses on the complicated relationship between policymakers and the concept of world-class university. Specifically, the paper examines this relationship in the context of rapidly developing higher education systems, where institutions with shorter histories and smaller international footprints often face barriers in achieving quality, visibility, and legitimacy. Using theoretical heuristics from two major sociologists, the discussion will highlight complicity in social reproduction. Namely, Pierre Bourdieu's insightful work on capital and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986) and Syed Hussein Alatas' critical work on intellectual captivity provide analytical lenses for our discussion (Alatas, 2000).

Essentialism and Fetishism in WCU Discourse

Given the focus in this paper on higher education systems in the Global South, it is important to first clarify our perspectives on the relevant literature that already exists. Among the critiques of the world-class university discourse is a rebuttal against Western hegemony in education policymaking. This incisive critique builds on the growing debate about the rise of global metrics and the literature on policy borrowing in comparative education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Some of these critiques echo the methodological and practical concerns over a global template for education as expressed by many scholars. The hegemony of rankings and its negative impact on universities in the Global South is well documented (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). On a more profound level, some scholars criticize the ontological and epistemic biases in university rankings (Shahjahan, Blanco, & Andreotti, 2017). Namely, the Eurocentric framing of rankings enforces a narrow architecture of excellence in higher education. Ranking is also criticized as a form of soft power that hinders self-determination in non-Western higher education systems (Lo, 2011). These critical reflections highlight the inequities of global metrics and the adverse consequences on higher education in the South. However, an overly homogenous view of higher education in the Global South often underpins such analyses, which rely on assumptions about culture, power, and geography. Specifically, these critiques often portray the Global North as an oppressive regime juxtaposed to a powerless Global South. Seemingly, the education landscape of the Global South is riddled with imported artefacts. From international best practices to standardized curricula, the once pristine Global South must now make sense of these artefacts. Furthermore, critical theorists often present non-Western traditions in

education as innately humanistic and transformative. This binary perspective perpetuates not only stereotypes about world order but also a fetishism that romanticizes the Global South – a complete reversal of the orientalism that Edward Said chronicled in his seminal treatise (Said, 1978). By framing rankings as a foreign artefact and emphasizing the impact of league tables, these critiques present power as an exogenous force, displaces accountability, and exonerates local actors.

Comparative Case Studies

Several factors inform the methodological decision to compare Malaysia and Kazakhstan in this paper. Although categorized as upper middle-income countries today, both Malaysia and Kazakhstan may nevertheless be classified as semi-peripheral and former colonies, which are particularly apposite to our research focus. Both countries are extremely active in developing their higher education and promoting global engagement across many policy sectors (Kovaleva & Lee, 2016). Both countries also share a long history as former colonies of Britain and the Russian empire dating back to the 18th century. Both countries also struggle to transform from rentier states to knowledge economies. Based on these uncanny similarities in history and political economy, this paper compares the national policies of the two countries to illustrate local agency in the reproduction of world-class universities. Specifically, the paper will focus on the selection of strategic partners, the development of curriculum, the arrangement of student mobility programs, and the evaluation of senior leaders and academics.

References:

- Alatas, S. H. (2000). Intellectual imperialism: Definition, traits, and problems. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 28(1), 23–45.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In G.R. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Hazelkorn, E. (2017). *Global rankings and the geopolitics of higher education*. New York: Routledge.
- Kovaleva, L., & Lee, J. T. (2016). Higher Education in Kazakhstan. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Asia Pacific Higher Education* (pp. 653–663). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Lo, W. Y. W. (2011). Soft power, university rankings and knowledge production: Distinctions between hegemony and self-determination in higher education. *Comparative Education*, 47(2), 209-222.
- Ordorika, I., & Lloyd, M. (2015). International rankings and the contest for university hegemony. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(3), 385-405.
- Shahjahan, R. A., Blanco Ramirez, G., & Andreotti, V. de O. (2017). Attempting to imagine the unimaginable: A decolonial reading of global university rankings. *Comparative Education Review*, 61(S1), S51–S73.