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## Educators *sans frontières*? Borders and power geometries in transnational education

Maggi W. H. Leung<sup>a</sup> and Johanna L. Waters<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

### ABSTRACT


Education work denotes a relational encounter among individuals positioned along axes of intersecting differences. Transnational education (TNE) offers a particularly intriguing context for conceptualising borders and power relation in knowledge production. Drawing upon empirical work conducted in the UK and Hong Kong, this paper interrogates the notion of border in TNE and analyses how ‘flying faculty’ involved in UK TNE programmes in Hong Kong perceive, manage and experience socio-cultural, institutional and other borders. We contextualise the personal experiences of these ‘educators *sans frontières*’ in the broader power geometries in which they are embedded. Our findings reveal the presence and strength of diverse borders in the TNE field. These borders are contexts of control and capital accumulation, where existing power relation is being negotiated and contested on a daily basis. We also highlight the rapidly changing power geometries in the field marked by the rise of the new powers, like Hong Kong, in the international higher education system. The paper ends by calling for more appreciation and efforts in harnessing the generative and creative potential of borders. Exploring borders as contexts of exchanges and co-production would contribute to more equitable partnerships among diverse stakeholders in the expanding TNE sector.

### KEYWORDS

Transnational education;  
educator; border; power;  
Hong Kong; UK

## Introduction

Education work denotes a relational encounter among individuals positioned along axes of intersecting differences. Students and teachers, but also parents, administrators etc. of different age, gender, class, race/ethnicity, place-identity, capability, (dis)abilities, to name a few – all translated to power – converge in specific time–space through which knowledge are contested, transferred and (co)produced. Education work, therefore, can be conceptualised fundamentally as border work. Transnational education (TNE), referring to the provision of education qualifications from institutions in one country to students in another, offers a particularly intriguing context for conceptualising borders and power relation in knowledge production. Taken at face value, TNE programme is

**CONTACT** Maggi W. H. Leung  [w.h.m.leung@uu.nl](mailto:w.h.m.leung@uu.nl)

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designed to bring credentials across geographical borders to ‘glocal’ students, who cannot or choose not to become ‘real’ international students and study abroad. By moving programmes and teachers across geographical and institutional borders to students *in situ*, TNE pledges to deliver ‘Knowledge without Borders’ – used as a slogan by The University of Nottingham in promoting its TNE programmes in Malaysia and China. The rapid expansion of this education service (or business) segment worldwide signals the success of TNE’s promise to break borders and erase distances. This seems to hint at an effective transfer of course content, recognition and prestige across space. Contrary to this ‘flat world’ imagery, however research (Waters and Leung 2013a) has increasingly recognised that TNE offers anything but the unproblematic transfer of knowledge and related ‘institutional social capital’ (Brinton 2000) from one national and/or institutional context to another. The realities of different geographies and borders render difficult (at best) and (at worst) impossible the wholesale transplanting of education programmes and their capacity-building potential and promises (Leung and Waters 2013a). Our paper deepens the analysis on borders in TNE. Specifically, we draw on detailed empirical work conducted in both the UK and Hong Kong to illustrate the lived experiences of educators who are involved in the provision of TNE. We inquire how educators from TNE providing institutions experience and work with borders – conceptualised as a multiple and dynamic concept – that they encounter in their work. Furthermore, we contextualise their personal experiences in the broader power geometries in which these individuals are embedded.

In spite of its growing presence and importance, TNE remains one of the salient areas not touched upon in depth in extant scholarship on internationalisation of (higher) education and related mobilities. Our paper contributes to fill this knowledge gap. In particular, it deepens understandings of the providers of TNE that are framed by two lines of research, mostly conducted in Education Studies. One set of studies takes ‘top down’ institutional and policy perspectives to examine issues surrounding regulation and governance (Chan and Lo 2007; McBurnie and Ziguras 2007; Sidhu 2009), quality assurance (Mok 2005) and the economic imperatives inextricably linked to TNE (Naidoo 2007; Robertson 2009). The other set of research focuses on the teaching experiences among TNE teachers. In particular, a range of studies have documented the learning, teaching and assessment challenges faced by ‘flying faculty’ who provide block teaching in off-campus locations (e.g. Dunn and Wallace 2004; Debowski 2005; Feast and Bretag 2005; Chapman and Pyvis 2013) with examples of Australian academics teaching mainly in Asia (Wilkins 2011), US academics in Brazil (Crabtree and Sapp 2004) and Canadian academics in Qatar (Prowse and Goddard 2010) among others (Wallace and Dunn 2008). Main topics covered in this body of work evolve around a variety of challenges these academics encounter: teaching long hours within short durations, high workload and requirements to condense materials are found to take a toll on teaching staff (Gribble and Ziguras 2003; Debowski 2005). Difficulties in teaching across language barriers and cultural differences (e.g. in the perception of time, gender relationship, modes of knowledge acquisition) are also often discussed (Bodycott and Walker 2000; Evans and Tregenza 2002; Crabtree and Sapp 2004; Dunn and Wallace 2004; Debowski 2005; Prowse and Goddard 2010). Problems in conducting TNE as team work between flying faculty and the local staff have been addressed (e.g. Leask 2004; Keevers et al. 2014). Aside from these ‘rough edges’, the potential for personal professional advancement, as well as financial and lifestyle

advantages for flying faculty have also been noted (Wilkins 2011; Hoare 2013; Smith 2013; Trahar 2015).

This paper draws on and develops this line of inquiry. We connect the hitherto dominate Education Studies perspectives to a broader Social Sciences scholarship. Specifically, we analyse the experiences of the educators using the notion of border. We conceptualise borders as dynamic contexts where diverse relationship between actors and institutions intersect, and power geometries traversing the TNE social field are signified. Our analysis challenges the propagated notion that TNE can defeat the power of place and space and simply ‘flow’ across space in the neo-liberal, globalised (knowledge) economic system (Leung and Waters 2013a). Using border and power geometries as our analytical lenses, we connect the dynamics both in and across individual and systemic (meso and macro) scales which have been treated in separation in extant scholarship.

In what follows, we begin with a conceptual discussion on borders and power geometries in TNE. An overview of the growing and increasingly influential TNE field will then be provided. After a summary of our research project and methodology, we proceed to our analysis, drawing upon our extensive qualitative fieldwork, which examined the nature and impact of UK TNE programmes in Hong Kong. Finally, we conclude by reflecting upon how insights generated from our case-study can inform broader understandings of borders and power hierarchies in the increasingly globalised education system.

## Conceptualising borders and power geometries in TNE

As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) maintain,

borders, far from serving merely to block or obstruct global passages of people, money, or objects, have become central devices for their articulation. Borders play a key role in the production of the heterogeneous time and space of contemporary global and postcolonial capitalism. (ix)

Our study focuses on the transnationalised higher education field, which is increasingly influential in defining what and whose knowledge is deemed valuable, and how it should be taught, learnt and produced. In this dynamic socio-economic field, a wide range of actors (students, parents, teachers, administrators, employers of the graduates etc.) and institutions (higher education institutions (HEIs), accreditation organisations, migration agencies etc.) are connected through direct and indirect relations across geographic, political, social and cultural borders (cf. Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Levitt and Schiller 2004). Their experiences and interactions are affected by and shape the field’s distinct and shifting relationalities and power geometries (Massey 1999). TNE provides a particularly provocative context to think about the shifting nature and power of borders, which are present in teaching–learning processes ‘even’ in domestic/localised contexts. As Caruana and Montgomery (2015) maintain:

[Transnational higher education] brings ‘home’ and ‘host’, ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ states, institutions and their staff and students into intercultural partnership relationships that, rather than being static, are subject to a continuous process of change in relation to where one ‘position’ stands relative to ‘the other’. (7)

Drawing on her work on a private Australian accounting college in China, Pullman (2015) also underlines the importance of borders (or boundaries):

The space of transnational education involves erection and evaluation of boundaries, ‘mapping’ cultural boundaries for what is perceived to exist within and outside. (10)

Extending beyond the hitherto focus on cultural borders in TNE research as reflected above, this paper interrogates the nature and effects of borders in their myriad forms, as in territorial, institutional, social, economic and inter-personal terms. We draw upon conceptualisations of borders in critical border studies and critical migration studies which have called to decentre and problematise the border. We conceptualise borders as multiple and dynamic, producing and being produced by the shifting power relationship among individuals and institutions involved, both directly and indirectly, in their formation and operation. Border is, hence, as Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2012) conclude never simply “‘present”, nor fully established, nor obviously accessible. Rather, the border is manifold and in a constant state of becoming (728)’; it is always ‘located, partial and incomplete’, and cannot be fixed, stable or universal (Bauder 2011, 1129). Far from simply drawing the various kinds of borders as defined lines of division in the TNE field, we map out bordering practices that are understood as ‘activities which have the effect ... of constituting, sustaining, or modifying borders’ (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012). We are interested in uncovering how borders divide and connect (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), and how they function as filters for the (unequal) exchange of various forms of value (Kearney 2004). Borders, as contexts of exchange, are inherently productive and generative (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009; Bauder 2011; De Genova 2013). Since borders are nested and transect different scales, their generative nature can also be traced across scales. At a personal or an inter-personal level, borders ‘place people in new types of relations with others and they impart particular kinds of subjectivities’ (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009, 6); at the same time, borders are also ‘generative of larger spaces, differentiated through the relations that borders organize and regiment, facilitate or obstruct’ (De Genova 2013, 254). In this paper, we examine the nature and power of borders in the TNE field at diverse, intersecting scales from the perspectives of the educators.

## An overview of the TNE landscape

TNE denotes education ‘in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based’ (UNESCO/Council of Europe 2001). Hence, this mode of international education involves ‘the mobility of academic programme and providers/institutions across jurisdictional borders to offer education and training opportunities’ (British Council 2014, 4). The umbrella term ‘TNE’ covers full-time or part-time programmes that span across the Bachelor to Doctoral spectrum. TNE can be operated solely by foreign providers (e.g. full-scale off-shore campuses), or with local partners. Furthermore, these programmes are packaged in a wide variety of formats: validation of local programmes by foreign degree-conferring institutions, collaborative delivery with shared input in curriculum (e.g. joint/double/dual degrees), franchising of foreign degrees for local delivery, faculties in educational villages, twinning arrangements with study in both the local country and where the degree-conferring institutions are based, distance

learning programmes, and advanced standing or articulation agreements (via credit transfer).<sup>1</sup> These programmes are delivered through a plethora of models ranging from distance or technology-enabled to face-to-face learning.

TNE has undergone 'explosive growth' in the last two decades (Sharma 2015). Delivered in a wide array of forms, TNE has evolved to be a key feature of the internationalisation strategies of an increasing number of HEIs worldwide, as providers and/or recipients of these educational services. As stated in a recent University World News webinar 'Transnational education trends' (held in New York on 24 May 2016),<sup>2</sup> 'TNE is becoming a financial necessity for some institutions and a strategic differentiation for others'. In spite of its growing presence, economic and socio-cultural importance, we know relatively little about it. The field changes fast. The number of programmes, their subjects and number of enrolled of students change from year to year, semester to semester. Reliable and comparable data are rare (Sharma 2015), but more information can be found on the dominant players. The UK is the biggest provider of TNE programmes in the world. Australia is another pioneer of TNE and a leading 'sending' country of higher education programmes and vocational education and training programmes. The U.S.A and Canada are also big players. In comparison, export of education is a nascent and relatively small 'business' for non-Anglo-Saxon European universities. Rapid changes have however taken place in the past decade. More and more continental European HEIs have realised TNE's great potential and worked to get a share of the expanding global market.<sup>3</sup> A number of traditional host countries of TNE programmes such as Hong Kong, China, Singapore and India have also started offering their programmes overseas. TNE destinations present a much wider geographical spread. In a recent report on the impacts of TNE on host countries (British Council 2104), the programmes offered in 10 major destinations were surveyed. Selected by the maturity of TNE provision, diversity of delivery modes and geographical mix, the 10 countries chosen were Botswana, China, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and Vietnam. All in all, recent trends indicate that TNE, as an education system of business, is becoming increasingly extensive and multi-directional.

While the nation-scale is often taken as the spatial unit of comparison and discussion for TNE policies and practises, it is important to underline the tremendous intra-national difference featuring, among others, a strong urban (especially capital city) bias (Brandenburg et al. 2013). At the institutional level, HEIs in different 'sending' countries have varied motivation, approaches and ability in offering TNEs. The same also applies to the host. Institutional linkages made in the TNE field are highly uneven and selective. Perspectives among the individuals engaged in and affected by these programmes are also diverse. It is therefore imperative to depart from the broad and generalised narratives at the national (or even macro-regional level e.g. European Higher Education Area) to get to the realities on the ground. Our study aims to do so by examining the details and lived experiences of the UK-Hong Kong case. Before we zoom into it, an overview of the landscape is in order.

The UK has exported higher education programmes for over 20 years. UK HEIs offer a multitude of TNE programmes through a diverse and complex range of modes of delivery. According to the British Council, over 590,000 students worldwide are enrolled in British TNE programmes.<sup>4</sup> The reach of UK TNE is impressive, reaching all but 15 countries in the world. Almost three-quarters of UK HEIs were involved in TNE provision in 2014/2015. The top ten 'host countries/region' were Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, China,

Oman, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Greece, United Arab Emirates and India (HEGlobal, 2016).<sup>5</sup> British TNE providers promise ‘world-class education’, with ‘countless advantages’ including good ‘reputation and quality’ and employment prospects – qualities marketed on the British Council website ‘UK courses and qualifications delivered overseas’.<sup>6</sup> These programmes have been successful, at least from the revenue generation point of view. It was estimated that TNE generated almost £496 million for the UK economy in academic year 2012/2013 (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014, 3). It is therefore not surprising that TNE ‘sits at the heart of the internationalisation strategies of many UK universities’.<sup>7</sup>

The UK is the biggest TNE provider in Hong Kong. According to the British Council, over 30,000 students are studying for a UK qualification in the territory, with a choice of over 700 courses. The UK offers 60% of non-local programmes in Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup> These courses are generally more expensive than local subsidised undergraduate programmes – annually HKD46,500 to HKD119,000 for TNE programmes (British Council 2011, 90) as compared to HKD42,000 for local degrees in the period of our research.<sup>9</sup> Other major providers in Hong Kong are HEIs from Australia, U.S.A, mainland China and Canada. The majority of degree TNE programmes offered by UK HEIs are 1- or 2-year ‘top-up’ degrees, which are also the focus of our study. Top-up degree programmes are undergraduate programmes catered for students who have failed to enter local universities directly and completed an Associate Degree or Higher Diploma, usually at a local continuing education college. UK and other foreign providers offer many of these students the only opportunity of obtaining a university degree, which is considered to be a necessary prerequisite for almost any ‘desirable’ job in Hong Kong. The value of such top-up TNE degrees is however questionable – at least according to the participants of our project. Graduates of these ‘international’ programmes tend to be less competitive for the best jobs as compared to those from local or ‘real’ foreign degree programmes (Leung and Waters 2013b; Waters and Leung 2012, 2013a, 2013b). However, this may or may not be applicable to other contexts.

## Research background and methodology

This paper is based on a research of UK TNE in Hong Kong, conducted between 2009 and 2011. Our project examined the nature and impact of UK TNE programmes that confer single UK degrees (rather than double or joint degrees) to Hong Kong global students. In this study, only programmes that involved UK-based HEIs and Hong Kong public HEIs (i.e. those funded via the University Grants Committee) or quasi-Government bodies (e.g. institutes of the Vocational Training Council) were considered.

Here, we draw on our interviews with the ‘providers’ of TNE. We interviewed 18 educators and administrators (most of them are in fact also teachers), representing 16 different UK HEIs. We sent emails and letters to universities and also deployed ‘cold calling’ in order to acquire our research sample. We sought a mix of older (arguably more prestigious, often referred to in the literature as pre-1992 institutions) and newer universities (post-1992 institutions, including many former polytechnics in the UK that were given university status in 1992). These institutions offered a mix of undergraduate (‘top-up’ that provides articulation for sub-degree graduates with an associate degree or high diploma) and post-graduate (master’s level) courses to students in Hong Kong. They were also involved in collaborations with other countries. In almost every case,



however, links with Hong Kong were deemed to be the *most significant* (whether financially, in terms of number of courses or students, or symbolically) of all TNE arrangements.

As we were initially more interested in the institutional perspective on TNE (rather than a more personal angle), details such as the age and nationality of the 'providers' were not sought. They did not seem particularly relevant to the discussion, although in retrospect they might have been useful. We interviewed 6 women and 12 men. All of the providers were academics at their respective institutions, but were also variously involved with the administration of the TNE programmes. We also interviewed two UK external examiners on TNE programmes, and three individuals working for HEIs in Hong Kong involved with delivering hundreds of UK degree programmes.

The main focus of the study was in fact on the students' experiences. We conducted a total of 70 in-depth interviews with students ( $n = 38$ ) and graduates ( $n = 32$ ) of UK–Hong Kong partnership degree programmes at different levels (undergraduate, Master and Doctoral). The 70 students/graduates (43 female and 27 male, aged between 20s to 40s, with diverse academic and social backgrounds) had been enrolled in 73 programmes (three interviewees had studied more than one programme). Interviews with students and graduates were semi-structured to explore their motivations, expectations and experiences in their study, as well as their career and mobility plans and/or experiences. These students/graduates studied for certificates issued by the UK educational provider, and yet most of them have never been to the UK, and many (as in the case of all the 70 whom we interviewed) were not very comfortable conversing in English. Furthermore, nine recruiters (potential employers, human resources managers) were also interviewed in Hong Kong for some perspectives from the job market.

All the interviews lasted between one and two hours. All research participants were given a choice to be interviewed either in Cantonese Chinese or English. All interviews were fully (translated and) transcribed in English. The transcripts were then examined through an iterative process, that is, first using pre-set and then modified themes, codes and categories. Relations between and among themes, codes and categories are then mapped out and analysed. Pseudonyms are used for all individuals and affiliated universities.

### **Borders as sites of control, negotiation and production**

Deployed on the front line in a way, TNE educators are expected to bring the British curriculum and pedagogic approach across geographical and institutional borders to the students and colleagues at the destination end. These 'British qualities' are marketed with pride by the education and policy institutions (including the key motor British Council) offering or promoting these programmes. They include 'world-class education', studying in English, gaining international exposure and skills in critical thinking and innovation.<sup>10</sup>

Similar to the accounts produced on the power of linguistic, cultural and pedagogic borders in the extant literature, our findings also point to friction caused by language barriers in effective teaching and learning in a 'British' way. This is particularly the case in top-up degree programmes, for which the admission requirement for English is low as compared to that for local tertiary degree programmes. To work around this barrier (and to cut costs), all programmes we studied hired local lecturers, who worked mostly



on part-time, temporary basis. Friction imposed by the language barrier differs from course to course, from cohort to cohort. Depending on the context, the language 'border zone' is managed and monitored accordingly. As Karl (post-1992 institution) explained:

There's an issue of making sure they don't teach in Cantonese rather than English ... We do allow [the local lecturers] to use Cantonese to, on occasions, to clarify a point, but the main teaching is, all assessment is in English ...

In addition to the challenge around language, the TNE border is also characterised by other kinds of friction. Difference in learning cultures is also mentioned as a major hurdle in pursuing a British (or 'Western') education. Karl evaluated his students' performance:

Slightly disappointing. They're OK, most pass. This is partly down to what you might call the Hong Kong or Chinese learning style, there is a tremendous issue with learning by rote etc. not unique to our programme. ... We encourage the lecturers to stretch the students, to write assessments that stretch them.

Greg (post-1992 institution) highlighted the added-value he had brought to the Hong Kong students and colleagues:

I also do some teaching, mainly stuff like study skills and trying to get across to them about critical evaluation and stuff like that. I mean that's one of the big differences, they don't do much of that, they do a lot of I'll sit down and be quiet, you tell me what you want and that.

In a similar vein, Matthew (pre-1992 institution) shared with us his sense of achievement in changing the Hong Kong learning culture:

When it comes to looking at the types of assignment you get they tend to be very prescriptive again, and the marks tend to be down the bottom end and you, because they're not, the whole cultural system is not one that encourages criticality, so when we get to those modules it is, not hard work, in fact it's quite enjoyable, a lot of talking to them about it, and the last few year have seen a slight change in culture ...

The above quotes show that borders are not only interpreted as a hurdle, but also a generative space where differences can be bridged and changes can be made. It is important, however, to note that the general tone of our findings signifies a certain hierarchy. Hong Kong students and lecturers should adapt to the 'British' or 'western' (hence 'international') way of teaching/learning. The borders are, hence, also the very axes of differences where TNE flying teachers demonstrate their power, vis-à-vis their students and local colleagues. While this illustrates the hierarchising and stratifying capacity of borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), we also observed contestation at the border. Kitty (aged 24), who completed a British one-year, full time, honours degree programme in 2008 illustrated how the locals do not simply follow the rule coming from the UK lecturers:

Well, written things are in English, but orally, it's all Cantonese, as we have all local teachers, classmates also local. ... Foreign lecturers flew in to come. But they only gave lectures, but it was like only they spoke, and not really communicated [with us]'.

Language and ways of teaching/learning differences at the border challenge smooth transfer of knowledge and education practices. Contestations and negotiations of pedagogic

expectations and practices are part and parcel of TNE activities. Many TNE lecturers consider these different learning norms deficits but are not equipped to handle such inter-cultural problems. Drawing on his research in Hong Kong, Yang (2006) emphasises the need to recognise and accommodate cultural differences in pursuing successful TNE. Similar calls have also been made in other geographical contexts (Hoare 2013). However, such efforts appear to be an exception rather than the rule in our findings. This is further challenged by the compact teaching schedules of the flying faculty. The hectic and heavy teaching trips inadvertently install frictions and fortify borders, making it hardly possible to cultivate (more) personal, personable relations between staff and students, which is an important component of institutional social capital aimed for in (higher) education.

Engaging local instructors is a convenient means to overcome teaching/learning challenges at the cultural border. It is also a key mechanism for most TNE programmes to run at all – considering the rare appearance of the flying faculty – and keep costs low. The border also provides space for new possibilities. Karl (post-1992 institution) reflected, ‘There’s a strength with locals because they can contextualise your local examples’. It should, however, be noted that appreciation of the innovative and generative possibilities brought about by the convergence of different backgrounds and strength at the border was seldom heard in our research. Rather, the ‘need’ to control and monitor seems to dominate interactions between ‘foreign’ and ‘local’ staff members traversing the border. This is also confirmed by another study on British and US TNE (joint venture programmes) in China that one of us was involved in (Lubbers 2016).

For transnational educators, the borders are also site of capital accumulation (Bourdieu 1986) in the globalised knowledge economy. Educators who move to work accumulate ‘mobility capital’ (Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Leung 2013), build their teaching capacity (Trahar 2015) and an international career. Flying faculty have often referred to their TNE work as ‘life adventure’, (Sin, personal communication, 9 March 2015) that adds ‘excitement and glamour in their lifestyles’ (Wilkins 2011, 80). These academics’ mobility experiences can then be converted to diverse forms of capital in the TNE field. They also contribute to personal growth and an expansion of horizons. Karl (post-1992 institution) explained why he was so drawn to TNE work even though it could be exhausting:

You know I go and it’s a sort of, it’s almost an injection of stuff ... I come back and really understand how much better we could make this country if we could adopt some of [e.g. ‘great generosity in Malaysia and ‘great buzz’ in Hong Kong].. I like listening to the, one of the most interesting you can ever hear is on child labour, and hear a Bangladeshi perspective on what child labour actually, what it really means. ... so it’s nice to hear, interesting to hear their perspectives ...

The above narratives illustrate how borders are experienced, created, fortified, negotiated and disrupted in the TNE field. Borders are multi-dimensional spaces of opportunities and challenges. They are contexts of creation and interruptions to the teachers as they establish diverse relationship with their students and colleagues, as well as articulate with different norms and practices.

### Dynamic power geometries in the UK–Hong Kong TNE field

This section presents our findings that illuminate the power geometries in the TNE field, manifested at the meso and macro institutional levels, which in turn affect the personal experiences

of the educators. TNE initiatives have long been characterised as dominated by Western partner institutions who often dictate curriculum, orientation, language of instruction and teaching staff. They are seen as ‘simply exported intact’ with little effort made to adapt off-shore programmes to the needs or traditions of the society in which programmes are offered (Altbach 2004). This balance of power is, however, not (or no longer) so straightforward in the dynamic and increasingly complex terrain. Superiority that is marketed by TNE provider institutions (e.g. HEIs, British Council, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills of the UK Government in our case) are not left unchallenged as the power geometries in the TNE field change in the course of time and across space. The mobile academics are the ones who have to manage the elastic borders and navigate the power-charged field in order to facilitate the functioning and continuity of the TNE programmes.

Many of our interviewees are involved in delivering TNE programmes within several different countries, and are therefore able to compare their experiences of working in Hong Kong with these other countries. Indeed, they are keen to offer up this comparison. What interests us about the Hong Kong case is the emphasis UK educators placed upon how powerful agents and universities at the Hong Kong end actually were, as compared to most other partners they work with. This power manifests in different ways. Karl (post-1992 institution), who offered by far the most thought-provoking and eloquent reflection among our interviewees on this topic, provided evidence:

And the staff are good. And that brings its own problems in the sense that they’re much more likely to argue with us about things, we don’t mind that, but they’re much more likely to say well no, I don’t agree with that, and that’s fine, that’s fine, provided it’s not in an area where you can’t accept sort of compromise, there are certain things we can’t do. But often, I mean we had a situation only recently over [subject x], where the [subject x] lecturer [at the Hong Kong HEI] didn’t like the paper particularly.

*Interviewer: OK, the exam paper?*

Yeah, but actually when you looked at the reasons why, you know we came to the conclusion that the exam, that actually the [Hong Kong HEI] person was probably right and that what she was trying to do was probably correct you know, given the context. ... there are stages when, there are situations where we say yeah you were right, you think, you know, and that’s what we did in this case, we said yeah, OK, on the basis of what you’ve said. Administratively they’re incredibly efficient.

Beyond academic content, the perceived efficiency and smooth operation of their Hong Kong partners (vis-à-vis both their home UK institutions and their other partners in different countries) is a recurrent theme in our interviews. Karl’s narrative illustrates this:

Being with those people [administrators in Hong Kong] makes me feel a bit more energetic. You when you come back here ... [UK] Hmmm. I mean I once remember ringing Hong Kong and saying we might not have the certificates when we said we would because we can’t get the paper and they were, you know C., who I work for [in Hong Kong], was like – this is a joke? You know, and I said look when we do get it, it still takes about three weeks to print them, and she thought I was just pulling her leg ... .And I said and I can’t bring all these banners and stuff to the graduation, like they’re huge. She said oh don’t worry we’ll do it. They make them up and they’re perfect and no one can tell. They’re amazing.

This highly praised efficiency could also sometimes lead to minor difficulties in the relationship. Karl comments on the pressure Hong Kong-style efficiency posed on British academics:

I think it's a much more business like transaction, and that has its advantages though, you know, if they say they're going to do it by Thursday, it's done by Thursday.

*Interviewer: Oh everything is unbelievably quick and good quality as well, you're not, yeah.*

And that has an effect on [X University], because their students are like that. Now we have to resist that, they'll say I need my results within a week and we say you can't have them in a week, and that's it, because it's got to be marked by you, it's got to come back here, it's then got to go to an exam board and then it's got ... And they'll say well can I know? And we have to say no.

On a daily operational level, therefore, British academics can (sometimes) fend off demands driven by the differences between work-style in Hong Kong. These acts defend in a way the border between the service provider vis-à-vis the host in the transnational partnership, which is marked by different standards and expectations. More fundamentally, however, they face systemic challenges to the initial power relationship as the 'little sister' in the partnership matures. Karl illustrates this shift in positionality:

We've had problems with people like, places like [a top UK university] who think they can come in [to Hong Kong] and do stuff, second rate stuff and you know the people sitting in front of them have already got MBAs at American universities, top American universities. You can't re-hash some MBA lesson and call it a leadership programme, they're not going to buy it, they're much more sophisticated already.

This 'rise of Hong Kong partners' narrative is no-where more apparent than where international league tables are discussed, which happens often in our interviews with the educators. Jöns and Hoyler (2013, 45) claim that 'the emergence of these global rankings reflects a scalar shift in the geopolitics and geo-economics of higher education'. They also describe 'a wider tension in the knowledge-based economy between established knowledge centres in Europe and the U.S.A and emerging knowledge hubs in Asia Pacific'. Certainly, our data would reflect these assertions. Karl comments further:

We need a much more coherent strategy when it comes to international partnerships than we've got at the moment. In the past, I mean I think places like us and much more so other universities, saw these [TNE programmes] as a good way of raising revenue. There's a real problem, and the problem is 1) that many of the places where you could raise that revenue in the past are just getting better themselves. So, whereas in Malaysia for example, there's still a great demand for UK qualifications because there is distrust among Malaysians, I think, about some of the Malaysian qualifications, not in the big state universities, but you know others. I don't think that's necessarily the case in Hong Kong, I mean I think people, you know, Hong Kong, University X [their HK partner] are 124th in the world rankings, [our UK university] wouldn't be in the top 600 ... So it's not a question of them not having any faith in what is delivered in Hong Kong ... I don't think that's the case in India or in Hungary or in Malaysia where I think the fact that it's associated with a UK institution is the major driver for them to go in.

Karl highlights (i) the changing relative power position among the different partners (institutions and individuals) in the UK–Hong Kong TNE field and (ii) the differential value of a UK TNE degree qualification at different global sites. In Malaysia, Sin's

(2013) work has shown that students actively choose a UK undergraduate degree over and above one from a domestic, public institution for its perceived 'quality and prestige'. The situation in Hong Kong could not be more different. A UK degree at undergraduate level is a last resort for the vast majority of our sample and it receives very little recognition (from employers, government or society) vis-à-vis a degree from a domestic HEI (Leung and Waters 2013b; Waters and Leung 2013b, 2014). No doubt, the British educators we interviewed have to come to terms with this development and the daily power negotiations that come with it, though many did not acknowledge it when asked about it during interviews. The changing balance of power at the meso and macro institutional level in the transnational field affects individual educators who often find themselves in an unstable and contradictory position vis-à-vis their colleagues in their home institutions, as well as the partner individuals and institutions they need to deal with in their daily work.

## Conclusions

Despite the rhetoric that people (students and academics), education programmes (and their credentials) and knowledge can circulate in much freer ways in our increasingly internationalised education system, borders remain a substantial component that defines the globalised socio-economic field. Drawing on our research, we have shown that borders are very much alive – there is no sense in which TNE has eliminated or even 'broken down' borders that they claim to reduce or dismantle. Rather, borders of varying, shifting kinds remain as an essential element of the convergence zone where a range of people and institutions with differing motivations, agendas, power and constraints come together.

In this paper, we have expanded extant literature on TNE educators by connecting it to the scholarship on borders and power geometries. Our analysis has demonstrated how individual TNE teachers are embedded in diverse and intersecting borders, which reflect and define the changing power geometries in the TNE field. Borders, as we have shown, do not only divide, but also hierarchise and stratify people, goods (as in the programmes), knowledge, ideas etc. moving or being moved across them. Personal narratives of our interviewees illustrate some of these complexities. On the one hand, socio-cultural and institutional differences at the border are often perceived as a hindrance to materialising the 'knowledge without border' grand narrative; on the other hand, these disjunctures at the border are also defended and valorised as sites for accumulation, where TNE educators mark their distinction and harness capital and hence power, vis-à-vis their students and colleagues. The hierarchising and stratifying capacities of borders are, however, not rigid and fixed at all; rather they are dynamic and in constant formation being shaped and shaping broader power hierarchies in specific context.

Our findings reveal a general lack of appreciation and efforts in harnessing the generative and creative potential of borders. Though not always agreeing with what they have to do as flying faculty or administrators from the provider side, many of our interviewees have taken on a controlling and monitoring role; rather than exploring the border as contexts of exchanges and co-production. If we go back to the term 'transnational education' and take seriously the meaning of the prefix 'trans', a lot more efforts should be expected from all parties involved to stimulate relations that move 'across, beyond, through,

changing thoroughly, transverse, in combination with elements of any origin' (as 'trans' is defined by Dictionary.com). Nonetheless, the transition seems to have begun. According to a recent report published by the UK Higher Education International Unit, there is a call and a rising trend for 'equitable partnership approaches' that involve joint responsibility with host country partners for the development and delivery of programmes (HEGlobal, 2016, 72). This seems to be an imperative transformation if we acknowledge the rapidly changing balance of power between some of the traditional providers and host countries/regions and institutions.

At meso and macro levels, our research has documented rapid and substantial changes in the balance of power between partners in the UK and Hong Kong, unsettling the 'Western hegemony' commonly assumed in the general discourse around TNE. As one interviewee pointed out, domestic universities in Hong Kong presently out-rank the majority of UK institutions on international league tables and students in Hong Kong value domestic education far more highly. This offers new and different challenges when it comes to operating TNE programmes in the Hong Kong market. While this may be unique to Hong Kong and other 'emerging' successful knowledge economies like Singapore, such changes remind us nonetheless that TNE is a highly dynamic field. Hence, power relationships and capacity-building potential in relation to TNE should not be assumed over time and space. More analyses interrogating the perspectives from other stakeholders and in other geographical contexts would enrich our understanding of this increasingly important segment of the internationalised (higher) education field.

## Notes

1. HEGlobal website: <http://heglobal.international.ac.uk/tne.asp> accessed on 23 March 2015.
2. University World News is an online publication that reports on higher education news and developments from a global perspective.
3. For example, France recently announced a five-year funding plan to boost the provision and profile of French education internationally, including an annual €50 million to export French programmes and institutions abroad and another €2.5 million to develop a special unit to promote French TNE (Charles and Delpech, 2015). In March 2017, the Dutch House of Representatives has passed a Bill that will further encourage international joint programme development and allow Dutch higher education institutions to start offering full Dutch degree programmes abroad.
4. <http://www.educationuk.org/global/articles/uk-qualifications-overseas/>, accessed on 12 September 2016. It is important to note other numbers are also in circulation. For instance, HEGlobal (2016) reports 665,995 in the year 2014/2015.
5. These data exclude Oxford Brookes ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) registered students. These students are excluded from the data because of the 'Oxford Brookes effect'. Approximately 43% of all TNE students in the 2014/2015 AOR data appear to study with Oxford Brookes University, and nearly 99% of these include Oxford Brookes University ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) registered students. This one programme has therefore a huge impact on the total TNE figures.
6. [http://www.educationuk.org/global/articles/uk-qualifications-overseas/#why\\_study](http://www.educationuk.org/global/articles/uk-qualifications-overseas/#why_study), accessed on 12 September 2016.
7. HEGlobal website: <http://heglobal.international.ac.uk/tne.aspx>, accessed 27 January, 2012.
8. Website 'UK courses and qualifications delivered overseas' <http://www.educationuk.org/global/articles/uk-qualifications-overseas/>, accessed on 11 September 2016.



9. 1 Euro was about 10 HKD during our research period.
10. See <http://www.educationuk.org/malaysia/articles/uk-qualifications-overseas/>, accessed on 12 March 2015.

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