Summary of a master's thesis affiliated with the research project Geographies of Internationalisation

ULRIKA FLØISDORF HIGHER EDUCATION IN DENMARK: INTERNATIONALISATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS



Ulrika Fløisdorf

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DPU, Aarhus Universitet 2021

Title:Higher education in Denmark: Internationalisation and theinternational student experience during the covid-19 crisis

Authors: Ulrika Fløisdorf

Published by: Geographies of Internationalisation Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark. 2021

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Summary of master's thesis supervised by Hanne Kirstine Adriansen and affiliated with the research project Geographies of Internationalisation, Danish School of Education, Aarhus University.

INTRODUCTION

"Place is space with attitude"¹

This is a summary of my thesis about internationalisation and the international higher education student experience during the Covid-19 crisis in Copenhagen. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, higher education institutions (HEIs) were forced to lock down and move all classes online in the spring of 2020, while partly opening up during the fall of 2020. Throughout my fieldwork in the fall of 2020, I wanted to explore international students' sense of belonging in the virtual classroom and their shaping of new learning place(s) at home when incapable to study at the physical space(s) of the university. In order to work beyond binary logic such as local/global and domestic/international, which much educational research is based upon (Larsen, 2016), the thesis employs a spatial and mobility perspective. Furthermore, the approach helps to unfold international students' shaping of learning place(s) and space(s) (Fenwick et al, 2011) and shows how internationalisation is not a neutral but rather an uneven process that constitutes a plural landscape of students with different backgrounds (Brooks & Waters, 2011).

The triggering inspiration for the thesis emerged from two paths. Firstly, when the lockdown was a fact, as an international student myself, I experienced what it was like to have my daily routines disrupted. I both had to figure out how to shape an educational place at home, while having online classes, and how to relate to my fellow students and lecturers in an online space. Though I have lived in Denmark for many years prior to my current studies and thus have a well-established network of friends beyond the university, I experienced the lockdown and online classes as challenging. I therefore became curious about how other international students navigated through the pandemic, how they shaped their learning place(s) at a place as home, and how they created a "new normal" in their daily lives. Secondly, I regarded the pandemic as an extraordinary opportunity to explore the nexus between im/mobility and internationalisation and how the processes of internationalisation unfolded in international students' everyday lives when HEIs were (partly) locked down.

Based on four months of ethnographic work, the thesis addresses the following research questions:

¹ Taylor: 1999: 10

- How do (im)mobility and online teaching influence international students' internationalisation process and possibility to relate to new people and places?
- How do international students cope and structure their daily lives in place and space during Covid-19?

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ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

"Space is everywhere, place is somewhere"²

Through a spatial and mobility approach, I focused on the relational aspect between place and space, the nexus between internationalisation and im/mobility and how spaces were shaped into place(s). Like Doreen Massey (2005), I understand place and space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far and places as collections of those stories. Massey (2005) proposes an understanding of space as a product of interrelations that should be understood by the existence of contemporaneous plurality, "without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space" (Massey, 2005: 9). Through a relational conception of space, the relations between the global/space and the local/place are interconnected and co-constitute each other. In other words, the global is not some force "out there" but is produced in a local environment (Massey, 2005) and is another person's situated and real place (Larsen, 2016). The spatial perspective, then, reminds us to understand local places as an intersection of social activities and relations, open rather than fixed and stable, and it allows us to explore how places are performed and defined by practices, while at the same time they structure and produce practices (Larsen et al., 2016 Massey, 1994). Often, universities and campuses are viewed as places where students learn, meet and engage with other students and teachers (Brooks & Waters, 2018). However, as campuses locked down during the pandemic and classes moved online, new places to learn, meet and engage were created through online space. This example shows us how place is always in progress and that place and space are interconnected.

Mobility theory, like spatial theory, argues against the binary of places and people and instead addresses the interconnections of the different types of mobilities (Larsen, 2016). Mobility theories unite social, spatial, and anthropological research, combining concerns of sociology (inequality, power) with spatial concerns of geography (territory, borders, scale) and cultural concerns of anthropology (representations and discourses) with a relational understanding of the co-constitution of subjects, space and meanings (Sheller, 2011). Thinking through the lens of spatial and mobility theories allows me to explore the plurality of places while challenging the binary thinking about place/local as stable and secure, and space/global as fluid and active.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the mental images of the students' imagined study experience in Copenhagen and its people living there prior to their stay abroad I chose to include the notion of imaginary geographies in the thesis. I build my understanding of imaginary geographies from the work by Suzanne E Beech (2014), Edward Said (2003) and Maddy Thompson (2016). Said (2003) uses the term of imaginative geographies which he

² Taylor: 1999: 19

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argues takes place in all societies and are often constructed with a binary logic of "us" and "them". These imaginaries, according to Said (2003) emerges from how meanings are attributed to physical spaces and how knowledge about these spaces is constructed. Thus, applying the concept of imaginary geographies helps us to work out the binary logic of "us" and "them" and further tease out the students' real study experience as the way we understand the world affects how we experience and respond to it (Thompson, 2016).

FIELDWORK AND METHODS

Initially, I had planned to conduct fieldwork at one MA class at a HEI in Copenhagen, participating and observing their online and physical classes. However, due to Covid-19 restrictions, this agreement was cancelled and I had to search for a field site elsewhere. It turned out to be very difficult to gain access to any HEI in the Copenhagen area and I had to redirect my focus several times. In the end, I regarded the city of Copenhagen as my fieldsite exploring the interconnections of flows and connections created by the international students. As I did not gain access to a HEI and everyone was advised to minimise their social interaction due to the pandemic, meeting international students or faculty members who were willing to participate in the study became a struggle. After some time, I decided to broaden my search for informants and reached out to all and any international MA student or faculty member at HEIs in Copenhagen in the hope that someone would agree to participate in an interview. This explains why there is such a mix of informants in the study: 12 international MA students enrolled at 4 different HEIs all with different nationalities and backgrounds. Some are credit mobility students³ while others are degree mobility students⁴ a number of them were studying in their second- or fourth semester while some had just begun their first semester when the lockdown happened. Two of the students decided to return to their home country when the HEIs went into lock down, while the rest of the students stayed in Copenhagen. Additionally, five faculty members (lecturers and international coordinators) from two different Danish HEIs in Copenhagen participated in the study. The underlying cause to include staff members in the research was an attempt to better understand how HEIs have coped and adapted their internationalisation practices during the pandemic, thus adding a comparative attribute to the students' experience.

The corona restrictions also had a substantial impact on what ethnographic methods I was able to employ. Often, the field study involves ethnographic methods as observation and/or participating in another society, which later are interpreted and compared with other empirical findings rather than only conducting interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 20007). However, neither observation nor "deep-hanging-out" (Geertz, 1998) with any of the informants was possible, so therefore I conducted different forms of interviews: semi structured interviews (both online and meeting physically) (Kvale, 1996; Madden, 2010), time- and space line interviews (Adriansen, 2012), and "mapping the world- interviews" (Donnelly et. al.,

³ Students who are enrolled to complete a qualification in their 'home' university, but incorporate a short-term study experience in a 'host' university in another country (<u>https://www.igi-global.com</u>).

⁴ Students who are enrolled to complete a full degree or other qualification (i.e., award study) in a university outside their country of residence (<u>https://www.igi-global.com</u>).

2019). The accounts of the informants are an important source of data in all ethnographic research whatever their form, and like Hammersly & Atkinson (2007), I view the interviews as social events in which the researcher (and the informant for that matter) is a participant observer. In this sense, the interviews did not only provide me with the informants' answers, but also with a brief picture of how they interacted, their body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, clothing and other materials at the place of the interviews. Apart from observing informants' body language from an analytical point of view, it was also important from an ethical point of view. As many of the student interviewees were put in a challenging situation due to Covid-19 restrictions, staying sensitive and looking for possible signs of discomfort or unease while interviewing was essential to ensure the informants' well-being during the interviews. Further, I employed digital ethnography, searching for information regarding the phenomena of Covid-19 and HEIs worldwide, as well as attending 11 different webinars concerning the above. The webinars provided me with a broader understanding of what consequences Covid-19 had for international students and their internationalisation process worldwide.

Following now is a summary of each analysis chapter of the thesis; The Faculty: Shaping of an International Virtual Classroom; The Students: Imaginary Geographies and Internationalisation beyond Campus, and The Students: Daily Lives and Place(s) of Learning.

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THE FACULTY: SHAPING AN INTERNA-TIONAL VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

The main purpose of this chapter was to explore what an "international"⁵ classroom looked like during the pandemic. During the lockdown in the spring of 2020, all teaching was moved to an online format, but when HEIs in Copenhagen partly opened up in the autumn of 2020, blended learning⁶ was the most common way to teach. I investigated how lecturers experienced the shift from a physical classroom space to an online classroom space, and what measurers were taken to internationalise the students' experience, teaching and learning through online teaching. I also explored how virtual mobility in online space such as Zoom and Teams could simulate physical co-presence in a fusion of proximity and distance, nearness and farness, being at two places at once. The analysis in this chapter shows that it is the relation and social experiences within the virtual educational learning space that matters, and that the sense of co-presence between lecturers and students clearly decreased within the virtual classroom, as well as their motivation and engagement.

For many of the faculty members, engaging and communicating with students in an online format was a challenge. Firstly, the virtual classroom space accentuated the differences in who was actively engaging and who was not. The students who used to speak a lot in the physical classroom spoke even more online, and the students who usually did not speak that much in the physical classroom both spoke even less and turned their cameras off. A sense of presence, which creates a sense of community and influences student interaction and learning (Lehman, 2011), was often missing in the online classes according to the lecturer interviewees. The lecturers felt they needed to develop new creative pedagogies to improve the teaching online and try to make a more inclusive learning space. One of the tools that was used was virtual break-out rooms, where 2-5 students worked in smaller groups where they e.g., discussed a particular topic or case and then returned to the main virtual classroom to discuss further with the whole class. Helen, one of the lecturers said, that this approach helped the students, who found it challenging to have their cameras on and speak in front of the whole class, to engage in the break-out rooms. Secondly, the lecturers commented that it was demanding to get all of the students online, and that not having a reliable internet was a huge obstacle through many classes. Thirdly, the lecturers highlighted how teaching

⁵ Throughout the text I make use of inverted commas e.g. "international classroom" as a reminder of alerting us of the complexities of the meaning of what, where and who the international is within the context of IoHE.

⁶ A mix of online teaching and traditional classroom teaching.

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in front of "black screens" ⁷ was demotivating and tiring, not being able to see the students' facial expressions. Urry (2007) argues that the face is an unmediated access to the affective register of another person and therefore is key when creating a sense of co-presence and building relations in the virtual space. My study shows that the sense of distance between lecturers and students clearly increased when students turned their cameras off during online classes, and as a result decreased both lecturers' and students' motivation and engagement.

Apart from affecting the lecturers' possibilities to engage with students while teaching, the closed spaces at the universities premises reduced the possibilities for more informal meetings that usually takes place in between classes or when meeting in the hallways. As Helen, one of the lecturers, told me "...when you are at campus [the students] can ask questions during break, it is much easier. If we take all these things away it is not the same. Online they don't have as much support helping them". Helen's comment shows how different spaces, online classroom versus campus, were not compatible in terms of relating and supporting students during the prevailing circumstances at the time. Thus, international students who might have been struggling and might not know how to navigate within the Danish HE system, were less likely to reach out to the lecturer for support when only meeting online than meeting in the physical classroom.

Concerning internationalisation practices in the classroom during the pandemic, Helen explained that it was impossible to recreate an "international" classroom that could replace the international students' intended study abroad. With an attempt to "internationalise" the classroom experience she used different examples from different countries and English as medium of instruction (EMI). The use of EMI is often seen as an obvious catalyst to create an international classroom space (Kim, 2014), and as a benefit for students to gain an improved international profile and increase their mobility opportunities (see Galloway et al., 2020; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). However, critics have noted (e.g., Pennycook, 1994; Svensson & Wihlborg, 2010) that the use of English as the main language of instruction in international education contributes to the dominance of "Western knowledge" and is as an example of Western hegemony and homogenization.

The other lecturer, Ema, told me how she tried to include articles written by non-Western authors in her teaching with an aim to create a more diversed representation within IoHE. Further she voiced that students in her classes were seeking out more diverse articles and asked for peer-reviewed articles from other territories but Europe and the USA. As such, neither Helen nor Ema changed their practices of internationalisation when teaching during the pandemic, for them it was how to engage and create a form of co-presence in the online classroom that was the biggest game changer during the pandemic. Put shortly: rather than

⁷ When students chose not to turn their cameras on.

focusing on the more ethical aspect of *why* we practice internationalisation, the substantive focal point grew into *how to* practise internationalisation in the online classroom.

THE STUDENTS: IMAGINARY GEOGRA-PHIES AND INTERNATIONALISATION BEYOND CAMPUS

In this chapter, I explored imaginary geographies of international students and how these might contrast to their experienced study abroad during the pandemic. I investigated how places and the (in)accessibility to places facilitated or hindered students to practise non-academic activities, and their process of internationalisation beyond campus. Throughout the interviews, students expressed their huge disappointment of the conditions that came along with Covid-19 and how it changed their imagined study abroad experience. I asked whether there might be differences between how students, who arrived before the lockdown, negotiated their decision to stay or disrupt their stay in Denmark when borders and HEIs locked down, compared to students who had arrived previously to the spring semester of 2020.

For a large number of international students, the aspect of relating to new people and places is a substantial purpose of studying abroad (Beech, 2014; Larsen, 2016). Students voiced their frustration and distress whether it was because they had disrupted their stay in Denmark and returned to their home country, or because of the cancelled activities at and beyond campus, or the fact that it was difficult connecting with new people and places due to Covid-19 restrictions. One of the students, Ellen, who decided to return home to Germany and continue her abroad studies there when the lockdown happened, said: "I think to be an international student studying in class is just one part, but this situation [having returned home] I could only experience this [online teaching]". Ellen's and other informants' descriptions thus point to internationalisation as not only going on in the bounded space of HEIs but as a process that continues beyond the classroom and campus. Consequently, international students who returned to their home countries were left with the online classroom experience and did not have any possibility of internationalisation beyond campus as they were physically situated in another country. Noted by Massey (2004), the construction of place is relational, hence, place does matter. On the other hand, students who stayed in Copenhagen still had the possibility to explore the city, even though with less social interaction. They also experienced how the Danish government and society coped with the situation with Covid-19. Despite the fact that Covid-19 restrictions called for a minimum of social interaction, students who stayed in Copenhagen could meet with a bubble of friends and for example go for walks. These experiences all contributed to the students' process of internationalisation.

Viva a student who decided to stay in Copenhagen during the lockdown said: "I would like to experience more local activities and see how people celebrate festivals and different things. Now I could not experience anything here". Relating to new people and places and exploring implicit

matters such as how people greet each other, how body language is used, and visiting more concrete places such as museums and castles were some of the things students told me they missed out on due to Covid-19 restrictions. The desire to experience new places and worlds different from their own, to develop multicultural skills while having their "experience of a lifetime" was shunned due to the pandemic. These desires and perceptions were all placespecific and centred around Denmark and Copenhagen. Places, as noted by Urry (2007), are often central to the networked social life and many of these networks are organised around "live" events e.g., festivals and concerts which generate intense moments of co-presence. Put shortly: e.g. sightseeing through Copenhagen is more than just seeing a site, it is a social practise that produces tangible memories and personal meanings. However, the imaginaries about these places and social practices became altered and washed away. Some students told me that during lockdown they biked or ran through an empty Copenhagen seeing the sights and experiencing the city by themselves, missing out on the co-presence and togetherness with other students. Co-presence and proximity are therefore essential when understanding the students' disappointments of not relating and experiencing the city of Copenhagen and its' people.

Further, I explored how students' study abroad imaginaries together with the spatial-temporal aspect of being a student having a pre-established network of people in Copenhagen prior to the lockdown, compared to newly arrived students, might have affected their decision to stay or return to their home-country when lockdown happened. However, my study shows that there is no explicit trend in the aforementioned, rather there is a lot of variety in the students' decisions to stay or leave which is contextual to every individual.

THE STUDENTS: DAILY LIVES AND PLACE(S) OF LEARNING

In the final analytical chapter, I explored what impact the reduced physical social interaction and online teaching had on students' daily lives and structures, learning place(s) and spaces and sense of belonging. Inspired by Fenwick et al. (2011), I studied how spaces were shaped into place(s) and became or not became learning places and how they were constituted in ways that enabled or inhibited learning, created inequities or exclusions, and how they opened or limited possibilities for knowledge. Through interviews, I listened to how students expressed how their daily lives collapsed and how they tried to structure a learning space at home similar to the one at their HEI, and how difficult it was to relate to new people online as well as develop a sense of belonging in online classes.

Before the pandemic, we might have taken spaces of the university for granted where students and faculty spent a substantial amount of their time. Building on work by Brooks & Waters (2018), the physical space of the university can be understood as a space where certain rules apply and particular activities happen. Prior to the lockdown, the majority of the student interviewees had used their campus as their study place as it was more convenient and the university campus was indeed understood as a place of study. Some of the students, who had used their homes for studying before, told me that during the pandemic they organised their study place differently than beforehand. Previously, they might have found a random place at home to study, whereas during the pandemic, they chose to have a specific study place in their home. Students frequently expressed how they attempted to create a learning place that was equivalent to the one they knew from the university and campus, and which was somehow divided from their "free time-space". One student interviewee who lived in a house together with other international students explained: "We kind of made the space into a small university...we had a designated space for socialising and working...people recreated what they had at the university space wise". The students aligned particular spaces such as the physical university and campus with educational practices and hence tried to re-produce a space in their home, which resembled the university space with an attempt to shape their daily life processes as before the pandemic. Their decision about how to reshape their space into place involved decisions about relations and particular places in their home, for example that no one was allowed to use the kitchen for studying as this was considered as a place for leisure. This shows that students bring with them place-specific understandings of how learning place(s) and social place(s) should appear as these understandings unfolded in their process of shaping place(s) and space(s) in their daily lives.

There were several of the students who described how it was difficult to focus and be productive when studying at home, as there were more things to get distracted by compared to when studying or having classes at the university. Therefore, it required more discipline from the students. It was not only the issue of distraction at home that the students grappled with but also a sense that both "study time" and "free-time" became blurred, all happening in the same spaces or places with no greater disruptions with activities "outside". There were some of the students who told me they became very unhappy and miserable, finding it really difficult to find the "joy" of studying when it all (physically) took place at home. There are, as Massey (1994) reminds us, many readings that imagine place as a home to be the security of a stability, which she argues, and I echo, is a false claim. Sometimes the place as a home might involve anxiety from e.g. abuse or as with some of the student interviewees' situation; constraint and isolation that led to a feeling of loneliness. There were students who expressed that they felt uncomfortable showing their home to their classmates and lecturers in the online classroom. One of the student interviewees told me she re-decorated her room with an attempt to "fit in" and to be included in the online classroom, but mostly she just turned her camera off during online classes.

A major part of the student interviewees voiced that their learning outcome became lower when participating in online classes compared to physical classroom teaching. However, it was seldom the content of the class as such, but the form and the absence of a sense of belonging and co-presence that generated this understanding of a reduced learning outcome. Students expressed how they thought it was difficult to read each other's body language in the online classroom. This of course required that students had their camera on. Rose, a student, described to me how "those small things" implicit and tacit body language got lost in the online classroom, while in the physical classroom you sometimes could "feel the air is of heat" when discussing with fellow classmates. The cohort of international students might be the most vulnerable group of students during the Covid-19 crisis associated with the conditions of temporarily moving away from their home-country (Tran, 2020), attending online classes trying to navigate through a "new" (Danish) education system without having the possibility to read each other's body language as in a physical classroom. The accounts from the students in my study show that co-presence and a sense of belonging in the online classroom is crucial to increase the learning potential and create a positive and interactive learning space.

CONCLUSION

I started out this summary with an introduction of how a spatial and mobility perspective could help unfold a more nuanced perspective when exploring internationalisation and the international students' experience, shaping of learning place(s) and sense of belonging in the online classroom during the Covid-19 crisis. I have shown that places are social interactions and are always in process (Massey, 1994). Further, I have argued that the process of internationalisation occurs not only within the (artificially) bounded spaces where educational activities usually happen. The analysis showed how the impact of students and lecturers being situated in different places (in their different homes, some in Denmark others in their home country, in the online classroom) was profound. Co-presence was more or less absent, and as a result students/lecturers and students/students had difficulties relating with each other. I have argued that the learning place has a vital impact on students' learning outcome, sense of belonging and process of internationalisation, especially for students who did not stay in Copenhagen but returned to their home-countries. As shown by Massey (1994), a place as home is not always related to stability and safety but can also involve a sense of isolation and restraint that might result in a feeling of loneliness. The analysis demonstrates how many students felt lonely and anxious during the pandemic, caused by an intersection of several elements: a lack of social/Danish network; loss of social interaction and activities; and a sense of monotony while study place(s) and social place(s) were blurred. However, the analysis also shows how students took agency and tried to reshape a "new normal" in their daily lives; shaping learning place(s) at a place as home with an attempt to separate their social learning place(s) and social place(s); running and walking; and connecting with friends and family online. In the ethnographic accounts discussed, we came to see how the way students shaped their learning place(s) at home clearly indicates that students associated particular places with certain activities such as the university/learning/studying and kitchen/socialising/eating. Thus, a focus on place making and shaping of learning place(s) can open for new perspectives of how space(s) and place(s) of learning are perceived. It is the relations between place and space that matter, and this forms the basis of the potential for students' process of internationalisation.

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