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Imagined geographies of learning: student perceptions of what can be learned where

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which Danish student teachers imagine different countries to be appropriate for different kinds of learning in the context of international student mobility. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper shows how geographical imaginaries are constructed and maintained by educational institutions and social networks. Furthermore, it shows that students ascribe different potentials for professional or personal development to different places. The paper finds that internationalisation practices risk reproducing stigmatised and hierarchical notions of the potential of places and the 'right' kinds of knowledge.

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Introduction

> Something of what I can learn when I get to the Faroe Islands is more convertible to something in a Danish context. (…) [because their educational system] resembles it [the Danish educational system], right, because something more African, Asian, South American is a bit farther away from our educational system. (pre-internship interview, 2019).
> It doesn't matter to go to London. It's the same. (…) It's a bit trivial, I think, to experience studying in London compared to studying in Copenhagen. I don't think it's that different. (pre-internship interview, 2019).

These excerpts are from interviews with two Danish student teachers planning a 6-weeks international teaching internship as part of their teacher education. The quotes reflect that Simon and Rose[1] have differing imaginaries of cultures and educational systems in a variety of countries and continents. Furthermore, they ascribe different potentials for learning to these places, and while Simon emphasises similarity as important, Rose emphasises difference. The value of what they imagine they can learn professionally seems linked to spatial location, which influences *where* they choose to study abroad. Both quotes reflect ideas about valuable knowledge, qualifications, and educational systems, where some are imagined to be more appropriate for professional development than others. But what shapes students' perceptions of places and the choice to study abroad in one place rather than another? Based on ethnographic fieldwork amongst Danish student teachers participating in international teaching internships, I explore the 'why of the where' when student teachers choose to study abroad. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to explore the linkages between imagined learning and geography in students' intentions to study abroad and address the uneven power relations in the internationalisation of higher education.

A vital aspect of the internationalisation of higher education is, amongst other things, to make students' worlds bigger by supporting the diversification of perspectives, development of intercultural and linguistic competencies, and global awareness (Knight 2012; Zimmermann, Greischel, and

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Jonkmann 2021). Within teacher education, internationalisation is broadly seen to prepare future teachers to teach an increasingly diverse student group to be global citizens (Cushner and Mahon 2002; Koh et al. 2022; Mahon 2010). In a Danish political context, the internationalisation of teacher education has been promoted as significant because teachers play a crucial role in educating pupils to participate in a globalised world (CIRIUS 2008). However, for example, Skrefsrud (2022) argues that intercultural competence is not a given outcome of internationalisation practices, both broadly in higher education and teacher education specifically (see also, Wikan and Klein 2017). Instead, studies show that such internships risk reinforcing students' dominant values of superiority and inferiority within education, thereby contributing to developing and maintaining neo-colonial views (Madrid Akpovo, Nganga, and Acharya 2018; Santoro 2014; Wikan and Klein 2017). Consequently, while internationalisation of higher education is often promoted as a neutral process, studies show that mainstream internationalisation practices, as opposed to the intent, reflect and potentially reproduce uneven power relations (Brooks and Waters 2011; Stein 2017; Yu 2022).

I turn to *geographical imaginaries* (Beech 2014; Said 1979; Watkins 2015) to analyse how students articulate ideas about place and places' potentials and how such ideas shape the direction of mobility. The paper is interested in exploring students' imaginaries about educational systems and cultures, primarily before their international teaching internship and how this influences what students imagine they can learn. I ask what and who constructs these ideas, especially attending to the role of educational institutions and staff. A growing body of literature recognises the importance of geographical imaginaries in student mobility (Beech 2014; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2021; Kölbel 2020; Larsen 2016; Phan 2022). However, while these studies are about international service learning[2] and degree- and credit mobility[3] broadly, the present paper focuses specifically on the teaching discipline. It explores how geographical imaginaries are influenced by hierarchical notions of knowledge and experience within a specific discipline. Thereby, the paper furthers the conversation on the role of geographical imaginaries in international student mobility. It contributes important insights into how these socially constructed and shared ideas about places influence the direction of mobility and reflect both geographical structures of power and disciplinary structures.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I situate the study in the broader field of research on student teachers' international mobilities. Subsequently, the analytical framework is outlined. Then, I explain the empirical context of the study and give a brief outline of the methodology. The analysis is divided into two parts, focusing on geographical imaginaries of place and how these are constructed. I finish with a discussion and concluding remarks.

Situating the study: student teachers' international mobilities

Over the past decades, the scholarly interest in international student mobility (ISM) has increased broadly in higher education and teacher education. In teacher education, internationalisation is a sub-field which is increasingly gaining ground (Koh et al. 2022). Especially studies of student teachers' short-term mobilities, such as international teaching internships or practicums[4], are widely studied across geographies (see, for example, Abraham and von Brömssen 2018; Cushner and Mahon 2002; Klein, Bergersen, and Larsen 2022; Tran, Le, and Henderson 2021; Yeji and Minsik 2019). Much literature within the field of student-teacher mobility is concerned with analyses of personal and professional outcomes of international experiences (Parr and Chan 2015; Sharma 2020), such as the development of intercultural competence (Cushner and Mahon 2002; Fitzsimmons and McKenzie 2006; Larsen and Searle 2017). A growing body of literature, however, pays attention to intercultural competence not being a given result of teachers' international internships and how such internships possibly reinforce and maintain neo-colonial views (Major and Santoro 2016; Santoro 2014; Sharma, Phillion, and Malewski 2011; Wikan and Klein 2017). Santoro (2014) points to a scholarly belief that experience and interaction with culturally diverse 'Others' is one way to prepare future teachers to become culturally responsive. However, in her study of Australian preservice teachers in India, she found the opposite to be the result (Santoro 2014).

In these studies, the question of *why* teacher students choose to study or teach abroad is rarely examined, as the focus often is learning outcomes. The question of *where* they go is likewise rarely discussed (but see Larsen 2015, 2016 who analyses the geographical dimensions of ISL students). This is interesting, as many studies of international teaching internships follow students from the Global North to the Global South (Klein, Bergersen, and Larsen 2022). The studies, however, do not explicitly include geographical perspectives, nor is it problematised why these shorter mobilities seem to be directed more towards the South than is the case with longer types of mobility. In this paper, I focus on the geographical dimensions of students' choices to study abroad.

Beech (2019a, 2019b) argues that studies of ISM should take seriously the social, cultural, and *geographical* factors involved in choosing to study abroad (see also, Prazeres et al. 2017). In a study of degree-mobility students in the UK, she centres on the social and geographical dimensions of the decision-making process by exploring the students' imaginative geographies. She shows that students hold imaginaries of different places that are socially shared and marked by colonial history and that these imaginaries influence where they choose to study (Beech 2014). Also, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021), in a study of Eastern European master's students in Denmark, points to the analytical advantages of geographical imaginaries. She argues that this contributes to a more multifaceted understanding of motives, rather than only analysing the matter from an economic perspective and push/pull theory, which is often the case, especially in studies of degree-mobility (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2021). In a study of North American students' engagement in international service learning (ISL) and study abroad in Africa, Larsen (2016) also employs imagined geographies to understand students' motives for studying abroad. More interestingly, she shows how her participants construct binary ideas of 'us' and 'them' based on their imagined geographies of African countries as 'different', 'developing', and 'impoverished' (Larsen 2016).

These studies provide valuable insights into the concurrence between geographical imaginaries and students' international mobilities, and they show that the role of imaginaries varies depending on the type of mobility students engage in.

This study contributes to the growing literature about the internationalisation of teacher education by exploring the geographical dimensions of student teachers' choices for choosing one place to study over another. Examining how students imagine different places enables a critical exploration of how discipline-shaped hierarchies of the 'right' kinds of knowledge and 'right' kinds of educational practices shape and frame international mobilities. The study also adds to the critical strand of literature about student-teacher mobility and the growing field of critical internationalisation studies (see, for example, Spangler and Adriansen 2021; Stein et al. 2016).

Analytical framework

This paper applies spatial and mobility theories as they can highlight the geographical dimensions of ISM and shed light on and challenge contemporary issues related to international education, including the presumed neutrality of ISM (Larsen 2016; Lee and Waters 2023). Mobilities theories attend to the combined movements of people, information, and objects within their complex relational dynamics (Sheller 2011; Sheller and Urry 2006). Sheller (2011, 2) argues that mobilities theories track 'the power of discourses, practices and infrastructures of mobility in creating the effects of both movement and stasis'. Inspired by this, I explore how socially constructed and shared ideas about different countries enable and constrain student mobility flows. Spatial theories draw my attention to the performative and relational nature of space and how places are produced when individuals inhabit and construct them through social activity (Larsen 2016).

Spatial and mobilities theories call for curiosity into what place might mean for different people and with what consequences. Place is not a fixed entity, given or separate from the people being in or imagining that place. It is instead about relations, placing of people, materials, and images, and holds different meanings to different people (Lefebvre 1991; Sheller and Urry 2006, 214). Drawing on Lefebvre and Enders (1976), Larsen (2016) argues that a spatial framework allows us to

understand how 'perceived space' influences students' choices to study abroad. These insights inform the analysis to understand how the perceivably 'same' places simultaneously are imagined holding different potentials and represent different qualities to different people.

Geographical imaginaries

I conceptualise ideas about places and potentials ascribed to places as *geographical imaginaries*. I understand geographical imaginaries as socially shared and constructed ideas and stories about places, which are sensitive to the influence of individual agency within the confines of structural realities but also have real-life consequences (Salazar 2011). Geographical imaginaries are relational, meaning that unknown places are compared and understood in relation to known places (Thompson 2017). This reflects the relationality and continuously changing nature of place.

Different versions of what I term geographical imaginaries have been employed in studies of, for example, international tourism, student mobilities, and migration (see, respectively, Beech 2014; Salazar 2011; Thompson 2017). Defining imaginaries as unspoken representational assemblages, Salazar (2012; 2020; 2011) argues that imaginaries are crucial for different forms of human (im)mobility and, therefore, essential to study. They surround and influence people's movements and are the roots of many types of travel. Therefore, attending to people's geographical imaginaries can tell us something about how people see and understand the world influences how they experience, react, and move within it (Thompson 2017). Based on this and inspired by Watkins (2015), I see imaginaries as representational and performative, meaning that they are both ways of talking about places and spaces and that they transcend language 'as embodied performances by people in the material world' (Watkins 2015, 509). However, while asserting that imaginaries have 'real life' consequences (Salazar 2012; Thompson 2017; Watkins 2015), I acknowledge that they are distortions of the real world (Thompson 2017) and that they are often obscured by stereotypes. Instead of being what they are, imaginaries, they risk becoming 'knowledge' (Beech 2014; Said 1979). This analytical framework allows me to explore how places are relationally and continuously constructed and bound up in forceful geographical imaginaries. Furthermore, it enables me to analyse how different actors imagine and shape the world in particular ways that enable and inhibit the spatial practices of these actors.

Setting the scene: international mobility and the Danish teacher education

In this section, I briefly present the context in which the participants' mobilities occur. As in the landscape of higher education worldwide, the internationalisation of higher education has also been a political field of interest in Denmark and has been prevalent in Danish university strategic plans, policy statements, and declarations since the 2000s (Wright 2022). This is also the case within teacher education. From a policy perspective, it has been argued that teachers who themselves develop 'international mindsets' during their education become capable of developing pupils' international outlook, knowledge, understanding, and ability to act in multicultural environments (CIRIUS 2008). International experiences are seen as a means to enhance teacher competencies and contribute to increased academic and pedagogical quality (Heidemann 2016). As it is now, student teachers can engage in different types of outgoing mobility during their four years of study, including study abroad (3-5 months), international teaching internships (six weeks), or short study trips. This paper is exclusively concerned with international teaching internships, which are supervised teaching placements at educational institutions in a destination country (Pedersen 2021). The students have three mandatory internships during their education. Of these three, one can be carried out abroad, and the students are supervised at a distance by a supervisor in Denmark along the way. Upon their return, they hand in a written assignment followed by an oral exam on par with their peers in Denmark.

Methodology

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between December 2019 and November 2020 as part of a larger research project studying the spatial and geographical dimensions of the internationalisation of higher education (Adriansen et al. 2019).

To examine the geographical dimensions of students' mobility trajectories, I interviewed 23 student teachers from a university college (UC) based in a larger Danish city. I also participated in multiple pre-departure meetings and classes and spent five weeks observing a group of Danish students during an internship in East Africa. The ethnographic approach allowed me to examine the students' mobilities from different perspectives across space and time. While this has resulted in a comprehensive data set in the form of field notes and interview transcripts, the following analysis mainly draws on field notes from meetings and classes and pre-departure interviews.

I spoke with 23 third- or fourth-year student teachers (18 women, five men) between 23 and 30 years old. They were recruited opportunistically at information meetings and lectures about studying abroad, through online posts, and e-mails the UC's international coordinator sent out on my behalf. The participants had a wide variety of destinations to choose from: they made a prioritised list ranging where they wanted to go from a list of partnership schools. The participants in this study went to nine different countries in East Africa (two countries), Eastern Europe (one country), Northern Europe (four countries), North America (one country), and South-East Asia (one country).[5]

I interviewed the participants at different stages of mobility: before departure, in situ, and after their return. The interviews focused on the participants' upcoming internship, including their reasons for studying abroad, their choice of destination, and what they expected to learn. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to steer the interview while also allowing for detours (Madden 2017). The interviews were conducted in Danish and recorded, and excerpts from the interviews have been translated into English subsequently.

To centre the geographical dimensions of the participants' mobilities and tease out the meaning they ascribed to them, I used a mapping tool approach inspired by Donnelly, Gamsu, and Whewall (2019). I asked the participants to colour a world map depending on where they could and could not see themselves studying. Concurrently with drawing, the participants told me about their choices. By listening to how they portrayed places while actively engaging with the map, I gained insight into their worldviews and boundary constructions of the world. This enabled a layered understanding of the geographical dimensions of the participants' mobility trajectories. Also, I participated in pre-departure meetings and classes alongside the participants to learn how the international internship was presented to the students and how they were prepared to go abroad. At these meetings, lecturers and previous interns presented different aspects of going abroad. Participating in these meetings gave me insight into how lecturers and previous interns portrayed different destinations, thereby enabling a nuanced understanding from where the participants spoke during the interviews.

Data analysis

The data analysis was inspired by a thematic analytical approach, which emphasises careful readings of the data and the development of themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2012). Based on the aim of the study and the analytical framework, I formulated the following questions to approach the analysis:

- What do the participants draw on and relate to when they choose where to study?
- How are the participants' choice of destination related to ideas about learning?
- How and where are such ideas constructed?

I carefully read and familiarised myself with the data before coding interview transcripts and field notes. I used OneNote as an organising tool to thematise the data and relevant excerpts relating to the guiding questions (Fernandes and Barbeiro 2015).

Due to the scope and aim of this paper, the analytical questions focus on imaginaries related to education and imaginaries at a specific point in time, that is, before or shortly after the participants' internships. Across the data, ideas about educational 'similarities' and 'differences' emerged as a theme in relation to the choice of destination. Social relations stood out as a theme in relation to constructing ideas of places and expectations of learning. I bring forward these themes as they bring exciting insights to the aim of this paper, namely, to explore the linkages between learning and geography in students' choices to study abroad.

Geographical imaginaries about educational systems

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part attends to students' reasons for studying abroad and their ideas about places and educational systems similar to Denmark. It explores what the participants imagined they could learn from places perceived to be different from Denmark. The second part examines how imaginaries are constructed relationally and addresses the contention that these imaginaries impact perceptions of what can be learned where, potentially inhibiting students' perspectives instead of diversifying them.

Similarity and place appropriate learning

> I think we chose Costa Rica because of the idea of adventure; it is warm and sunny and a cool place. Who's been there? It could be cool; it seemed like a nice place with new things to see and experience. (pre-internship interview, 2020)

Before we can attend to where what can be learned, we must ask why study abroad in the first place. In the quote, Frederik describes how a personal desire for adventure made him want to visit Costa Rica. Although he was appointed his third priority in East Africa, this was fine: difference and adventure were the most important, which he expected to experience outside Europe. For many participants, like Frederik, studying abroad was an opportunity for adventure and excitement (see also, Findlay et al. 2006; Waters and Brooks 2010), self-development (Doyle et al. 2010), or to go to a country they were fascinated by. However, they did also articulate academic and professional reasons. Some wanted to improve their linguistic competencies; others wanted a change in perspective to better understand the Danish educational system, while others sought inspiration in teaching methods and strategies. 'You need to think out of the box, (…) instead of just asking them do assignments on CLIO [digital teaching tool]', as one participant noted. The desire for adventure or professional development were not mutually exclusive goals, though the students emphasised either one or the other. However, various goals could not be equally achieved everywhere: places and their potential for outcome were imagined differently. Beech (2014) argues that imaginary geographies, though mere representations, structure individuals' understanding of places, peoples, landscapes, and cultures. I will add that they also structure what students believe they can learn from going to different places. This is paradoxical: the purpose of student mobility is to broaden students' minds and develop global understanding, but is this possible if the mobilities beforehand are structured and even narrowed by ideas about where, what, and who they can learn from?

Although most participants did not have experience with studying or teaching abroad, they had ideas about which educational systems were like the Danish. Especially countries that they perceived as culturally and economically similar to Denmark were also imagined as having similar approaches to education, pupils, teaching methods, authority, and values.

Simon, whom we met in the introduction, chose the Faroe Islands because he hoped his teaching experiences would be directly transferable to a Danish classroom. Without experience with the Faroese educational system, he imagined it to be similar in relation to language, the number of pupils in

each class, and teaching styles. On the contrary, he imagined African, South American, and Asian educational systems and countries as very different from Denmark. He did not ascribe the same potential for educational outcomes to these places. Also, Hannah and Signe went to Iceland because they imagined Icelandic teaching styles to be like the ones they already knew. They expected what they could learn would be more 'place appropriate' or transferable to a Danish classroom because they believed the pupils were accustomed to their teaching styles. Both Simon, Hannah, and Signe thus made decisions about where to go based on imaginaries of educational systems, reflecting that imagination acts as a powerful force in shaping human agency, as Salazar (2011) argues.

Maria, who interned in North America, was the only student who actively based her choice of destination on the OECD's PISA report of best-performing countries (Schleicher 2019). Her greatest motivation for interning abroad was to improve her teaching skills and learn something about teaching that she could bring back to Denmark. She believed this was possible by interning in especially North America, New Zealand, or Singapore, while she imagined that she would be the one teaching about teaching in other places:

> (…) it was my goal to see what highly ranked countries I could learn from and bring home [skills]. As I see it, Africa and the Philippines are on the opposite side of the scale [OECD], and you would probably have had a different purpose had you chosen these countries. For example, what could I bring from Denmark and contribute to these countries? And how could you bring some things from such countries back to Denmark? Is there something there which is very different from what you would do [in Denmark]? But it wasn't really my point of departure; my purpose was like, "How can I improve the Danish school a little with my teaching"? (post-internship interview, 2020)

Like others, Maria chose the destination based on where she believed she could find 'place appropriate' pedagogy that also improved her teaching. Good teaching and pedagogy thus appear to be found in some places more than others. This reflects Liu's (2000) idea of a moral geography, where the most valuable knowledge and qualifications are imagined to be found in some countries or institutions rather than others. Also, the Chinese students in Hansen and Thøgersen's (2015) study were influenced by perceptions of a global education hierarchy in their decision-making process. Although imaginaries might not have ground in reality, as Salazar (2011) points out, they shaped the students' mobilities.

Imagined difference and learning 'enough'

While some students were intrigued by similarities, others sought differences. For example, Scandinavia was considered a trivial nonentity, as it was imagined to be too similar to Denmark. 'Why go?' students said. One participant, Rose, believed she would benefit more from teaching in a place she imagined to be culturally and educationally different. She went to an East African country, and based on previous travel experiences in other African countries, she imagined that children there were in exposed situations, which she would benefit from experiencing:

> Like, I think, I really hope I will get the competencies to handle more special situations. Like, I am more interested, when I get a job, in working with people in vulnerable positions or something a bit special, like different from the public school (Folkeskole). So, I think that I expect, or I hope to get insight into what it is like to have a hard time. (pre-internship interview, 2019)

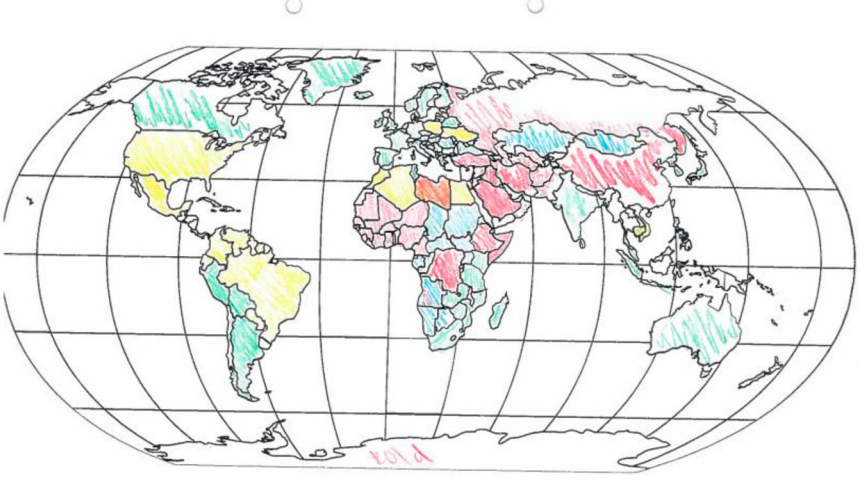
Rose builds her imaginary of these children on previous experiences, but there is no distinction between countries. Despite significant socio-economic, geographical, and cultural differences, Africa is imagined as one country or all the countries as the same.

Across interviews, participants, both those going to an African country and those who did not, articulated that they would not expect to learn much about good teaching practices from interning there. Instead, learning would be a product of experiencing something different from Denmark that could give them a perspective on how education is organised differently. Teaching methods and activities were perceived to be challenging to transfer, as they imagined the educational context too different from the Danish. The same applied to the Philippines, one of the most popular internship destinations

at the UC of this study. Particularly students who did not go there imagined the Philippines as a place for vacation and pretty Instagram posts – not a place for educational outcomes.

These narrations reflect a strong imaginary about especially Africa (students were not specific regarding countries but spoke of Africa as one unity) as an educationally underdeveloped continent. Many students had similar ideas about the Philippines. Lipura and Collins (2020) argue that non-Western education is seen as inferior and non-desirable in academic literature, while Western education represents a form of cultural capital (Waters 2006) with automatic 'portability' or transferability across all types of societies. This is partly due to the academic focus on Westward educational mobility as a route to success, which has provided little space for other configurations (Collins et al. 2017). Amongst the participants, non-Western countries were seen as non-desirable places for study abroad if the students wanted to improve their teaching skills. The participants ascribed different potentials to different places based on their geographical imaginaries. Thereby, they implicitly created a hierarchy based on comparisons of the familiar 'ours' with the unfamiliar 'theirs', which is at the heart of Said's (1979) idea of imaginative geographies. In his book Orientalism, Said (1979) shows how imaginative geographies are bound up in both the Self and the Other, which the student narrations clearly indicate: the imaginaries are not created in a vacuum but in relation and comparison to known and unknown places. During interviews, I asked the students to colour a map indicating where they wanted to study while narrating their thoughts while drawing (see Map 1). By the end of the mapping exercise, I asked some students whether the map would look the same if they were to study abroad (3-5 months). Interestingly, several students answered that it would not. For example, Rikke, who was going to East Africa, said that while many of the places would stay the same colour, Africa and Thailand would be coloured red because of the way she imagines the educational systems. While pointing to Greenland, Canada, and Argentina, she said:

> I would keep these [green], also Argentina, actually. (…) And Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, and the European countries, right. You could say that it is strange that you have a biased idea that it isn't beneficial enough, but again, they probably deviate quite a lot from what happens here at home, right. (pre-internship interview, 2020)



Map 1. Rikke. The green color indicates: 'places I want to go', yellow: 'places I might want to go', red: 'places I do not want to go', and blue: 'places I am not familiar with'.

Other students shared similar reflections, who were afraid they would not benefit enough academically from studying at African universities, nor could they imagine themselves living there for an extended period. Students mentioned that if they were to study abroad, they would want to

study at a place like Denmark educationally, culturally, or linguistically, reflecting a desire for sameness in relation to comforts associated with 'home' (Ogden 2007). In general, students said they would take their academic and professional development more seriously, for example, improving language skills, during a study abroad.

We see that the students divide the world into a hierarchy of places where the possibility of learning something of value to their education is more or less likely. Lipura and Collins (2020) argue that imaginaries of places are constructed and reconstructed by stereotypes. In this study, we see how stereotypes and ideas about where the 'right' kinds of knowledge and skills are located affect students' mobility to specific destinations while hindering it to others.

Social networks and the university college: constructing geographical imaginaries

> (…) It is also what I have heard from friends. The ones who have been in Peru and Ghana (…). "It was a super nice trip. We were sunbathing every day, and we did this and that". Also, those who went to the Philippines. But it wasn't focused on teaching and preparing. They didn't learn anything from that. (pre-internship interview, 2020)

In this part of the analysis, I explore how imaginaries are constructed and maintained through first social networks in general, then by teaching staff more specifically. The above quote from Josephine illustrates how she drew on others' narrations in her ideas about different places. She referred multiple times to what she had heard from friends who had previously interned abroad and how that influenced her ideas of different places and where she wanted to intern. Many other participants also articulated this: imaginaries about places, people, cultures, and climate were influenced by a wide range of people in their social networks, from family members to friends or acquaintances and different media sources. This resonates with previous research on how geographical imaginaries are constructed. For example, Beech (2014) shows the power of social networks in creating geographical imaginaries, while media sources, such as literature, music, advertising, and film, can reinforce people's attitudes to place. The power of both media and social networks is likewise reflected in Ginnerskov-Dahlberg's (2021) study of Eastern European students in Denmark and Phan's (2022) study of Vietnamese doctoral students. However, imaginaries about educational aspects appeared to be created primarily within the educational institutions among my participants. Here, particularly friends' experiences and presentations by students who had previously interned abroad, as well as international coordinators and lecturers, were important in creating, sharing, and maintaining imaginaries related to education and where what can be learned. For example, photos of white sandy beaches, clear water, and drinks posted by students interning in the Philippines were influential in maintaining and strengthening the imaginary of the Philippines as a place for leisure only. Yet, pictures of weekend activities posted from other places, such as safaris or hikes, were not mentioned to the same extent.

Word-of-mouth and pre-departure information meetings were also powerful in circulating images of educational systems. This, in turn, influenced whether the participants imagined a place or country similar or different to Denmark. Simon, for example, heard from friends who had previously interned in an (unknown) African country that:

> There is no inclusion in Africa; at the same time, they [pupils] are actually included. The difference [between Denmark and 'Africa'] is maybe just that they have to shut up, or else they'll get beaten. (…) "Of course, you [an intern] can't calm them down because you are not beating them", they are told by the other teachers, for example. (pre-internship interview, 2019)

Simon's friends told him about their experiences in one African country, but their stories contributed to creating an imaginary of all African countries as one educational space. This reflects the relationality of place and that imaginaries are socially shared (Salazar 2011) and their subjective nature (Beech 2014; Driver 2005). Simon's imaginary comprises all African countries as one place with shared educational values and educational approaches. This points to how word of

mouth and shared stories are powerful in creating imaginaries that cover not only individual countries but entire continents. In this case, it results in the imaginary that African countries are not suitable for learning pedagogical and didactical approaches that are valuable in a Danish context. However, it is important to note that although some imaginaries recurred across student narratives, they were not unilateral or shared by all. For example, many imagined Greenland to be similar to Denmark because of the two countries' shared history.[6] Others had heard that the educational level was low and that it was a tough place with many 'sad destinies', as several students termed it. This points to the relational nature of place, which is not fixed or separate from people being in or imagining that place (Lefebvre 1991). It is constantly underway and continuously changing and holds different meanings to different people (Sheller and Urry 2006). Places held different meanings to different students but were often spoken of in relation to something or someone – another place, friends' experiences, a TV show, familial heritage, etc., which reinforced attitudes towards these places.

Staff's influence on the construction of imaginaries

Several participants said that lecturers and international coordinators from their UCs shaped their ideas of different countries and expectations of learning.

During teaching sessions at the UC, issues of 'good' teaching and 'good' educational systems were discussed, and some countries were depicted as leading in this regard. One student told me that her lecturers said that North American teachers were front-runners and had greatly improved pupils' skills. This made her curious to experience in which ways. Another heard his English lecturer tell a co-student going to Uganda that she should be aware that it was not uncommon to hit children there. Two students going to Greenland experienced several lecturers telling them they should be prepared for a tough experience and pupils who were not necessarily thriving, which greatly influenced their expectations of the internship.

Some staff working with these students were aware of their influential role regarding expectations about places and learning. During an interview, an international coordinator said she was mindful of how she and her colleagues articulated their imaginaries. She said that, especially when talking about the Global South, they inadvertently implied that countries there were chaotic, so the students should not expect to develop their professional competencies. Though this was a way to protect and prepare the students for their upcoming experience, the coordinator thought it resulted in students and staff missing out on potential learning. Sharing experiences can be valuable, but generally, lecturers' implicit or explicit representations of countries and systems were consequential in forming participants' imaginaries. This emphasis on difference, the unfamiliar, and lack of nuances in some of the lecturers' representations shows how imaginaries, as Kölbel (2020, 10) phrases it, '(…) are often fed by unrigorous information rather than deep insights into other people's lives' (see also, Said 1979).

Across interviews, participants mentioned that their expectation of professional outcomes was reduced because of how international coordinators and lecturers talked about international internships. One participant was warned about doing an internship by her English lecturer, who believed the professional outcome was lower than in Denmark. Participants also experienced being told that they would gain 'something else' culturally and socially, which was very valuable. However, if they were 'in it' for an academic purpose, they should not go. We see an institutional hierarchisation of places, where different outcomes are appointed to different places, thereby influencing students' expectations of what can be achieved where.

Others' representations of places were also a direct motivation to explore and possibly counter these themselves, which several students said they wanted. Kölbel (2020) argues that people engage with dominant imaginaries in various ways, including resistance, acceptance, and involvement. Again, this underscores the relationality of geographical imaginaries in how they are formed and shared. It also points to their individual nature and how the students, through their mobility,

seek to explore dominant imaginaries, forming new ones themselves. As the previous sections show, students made hierarchies amongst countries and ascribed different qualities to different places. However, this does not mean the places became definite or fixed. Students' imaginaries of places were complex and sometimes contradictory depending on their individual goals for studying abroad.

The question remains whether these geographical imaginaries we see are constructed and shared at educational institutions are counterproductive in opening students' worlds and developing their global understanding? Are they unavoidable? Following previous theorisations, they are not. Instead, they are consequential in how we approach and experience other peoples, places, and cultures (Said 1979; Salazar 2020; Watkins 2015), enabling and constraining what we can learn. But can imaginaries be employed in ways beneficial for students' learning instead of inhibiting a diversification of perspectives based on hierarchical notions of, for example, good education and pedagogy? This will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion and concluding remarks

At the beginning of this paper, I raised the question of how students' perceptions of place influence the choice of where to study abroad. The analysis shows that the participants not only carry broad ideas about different countries but also carry ideas specifically related to countries' educational systems and their quality. Some educational systems are imagined to be similar to the Danish regarding approaches to teaching, pupils, and values, while others are imagined to be different. Those imagined to be like the Danish are also imagined to be developed and 'good', while those imagined to be radically different are perceived as backwards and 'bad'. These imagined differences and similarities influence whether the participants believe they can learn something of value to their education and future profession as schoolteachers. However, across interviews, participants agreed they would benefit and learn *something* no matter where they went. Some places, though, were imagined to be appropriate for experiential and personal learning, while others were imagined holding the potential for academic learning. Hence, imaginaries shape the direction of mobility in the context of study abroad, as also argued by, for example, Beech (2014) and Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021).

Furthermore, I have detailed how students carry and act upon institutionally and socially shaped imaginaries that hierarchise places as more or less developed and more or less appropriate for learning. A crucial analytical point is that imaginaries about educational systems and their proficiencies are particularly constructed and maintained within an institutional frame and shaped by educational institutions in the form of lecturers and students who have previously interned abroad. Also, more institutionalised hierarchisations of educational systems, such as the OECD PISA global education survey, influence how participants perceive different educational systems. This points to the importance of including dominant knowledge hierarchies within different disciplines when analysing students' perceptions of place and the choice to study abroad.

Examining geographical imaginaries also entails analytical queries. Due to the scope and aim of this paper, the analytical interest is focused on imaginaries related to a specific point in time, that is, before or shortly after the students' internships. While the analysis reflects how the students' imaginaries of different countries and continents are relationally shaped and influence their mobility trajectories, the scope of the study does not allow for unfolding the development of the students' imaginaries across a longer temporal scale. By zooming in on imaginaries at a specific time, imaginaries risk appearing static instead of fluid and in continuous development. This is not the case nor the intention. However, as the paper aims to examine the linkages between imagined learning and geography in students' intentions to study abroad, this temporal limitation is necessary – although I am aware of the constraints this entails. Elsewhere, I have analysed how normative ideas about education influence the teaching carried out in the context of international teaching internships, reflecting the consequences imaginaries might have on teaching practices in various contexts (Juul-Wiese 2023).

The spatial approach furthers our understanding of how 'perceived space' (Larsen 2016) and socially constructed ideas of place influence people's movements, for example, when the participants move in correlation with what they want to get out of teaching abroad and where they believe they can achieve this. Are preconceived ideas challenged and perspectives then diversified? The paper problematises the, at times, idealistic framing of the outcomes of internationalisation and contributes to critical internationalisation studies by showing that student mobility paradoxically may lead to a strengthening of stereotypes and inhibit students' perspectives instead of diversifying them (see also, Madrid Akpovo, Thapa, and Halladay 2020; Santoro 2014; Sharma, Phillion, and Malewski 2011; Stein et al. 2016). Adriansen et al. (2022) likewise problematise that internationalisation practices run the risk of making the world smaller if internationalisation, for example, simply becomes teaching in English or, I argue, if students' mobilities move in directions only based on preconceived ideas of places' potentials (re)produced in institutional contexts. Consequently, geographical imaginaries can be counterproductive to the purpose of internationalisation if they are not challenged or discussed. They potentially hinder international teaching internships as a site of intercultural development and instead reproduce stigmatised and hierarchical notions of place and the 'right' kinds of knowledge. In meeting this challenge, institutions and lecturers play a crucial role by being investigative about what beliefs the institution is (re)producing and allowing students to scrutinise their imaginaries both before and after studying abroad to ensure that imaginaries do not become 'knowledge'(Said 1979). This calls for further research into how geographical imaginaries and perceptions of place possibly open or hinder learning from studying abroad.

Notes

1. All names and countries are pseudonymised.
2. International service learning (ISL) is a structured academic experience in another country. Students participate in organised service activities and is a way to gain an enhanced sense of responsibility as a citizen both locally and globally (Bringle and Hatcher 2011).
3. Credit mobility is where the stay abroad is typically less than a year and part of a programme of study at a home institution. Degree mobility is where the student study an entire programme abroad (King and Raghuram 2013).
4. I use the term *international teaching internship*. However, the terminology greatly differs within the field of study e.g., teaching practicum, overseas student teaching, short-term international experience, overseas placement, cross-cultural education internship etc. These cover structured and supervised experiences with teaching in a country different from one's own. The length and scope of such experiences differ amongst countries and institutions.
5. All names and mobility trajectories are pseudonymised to comply with the Danish Code of Conduct (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2014), and all country names have been replaced by countries with similar cultural and socio-economic characteristics. Furthermore, participants signed a statement of consent regarding their participation.
6. Denmark previously colonised Greenland. In 2009, Greenland got home rule. While the formal colonial ties have been cut, the shared past is still present in the relationship between Denmark and Greenland (Gulløv 2017). For example, Greenland is part of the Danish Realm (along with the Faroe Islands), and Danish is taught as a school subject (Grønlands Selvstyre 2023).

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