# Exploring geographical imaginaries of international student teachers

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#### Abstract

This chapter identifies how geographical imaginaries play into student teachers' decision making of study and work abroad destinations, and explores how these predominantly collective, historic imaginaries are rooted in complex power relations, global hierarchies and postcolonialism. Drawing on two sets of data combining incoming and outgoing student mobility to and from Denmark and through the use of a mapping method, we explore student teachers' geographical imaginaries, enclosing their preferences and perceptions of different places. This allows us to analyse students' (implicit) geospatial associations and perceptions of where 'good' education and 'proper' knowledge come from. Exploring geographical imaginaries of international student teachers becomes of specific importance and interest as our findings highlight global power relations between the providers of ideas, knowledge and practices and the implementers in specific educational contexts. Hence, this chapter serves as a jumping-off point for further critical reflection on how higher education internationalisation and the internationalisation of teacher training (re-)produce unequal, historically shaped perceptions and an uneven spread of mobilised knowledge.

## Keywords

Internationalisation, teacher education, student mobility, geographical imaginaries, knowledge hierarchies

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#### 1 Student mobility and internationalisation within Europe

Internationalisation has developed as one of the key policy strategies and goals of higher education institutions' strategic plans (Altbach, 2007), and mobility is one of the key mechanisms through which internationalisation occurs. Often, internationalisation and, notably, mobility, are described as beneficial, inherently good and a neutral process (Morley et al., 2018). Higher education internationalisation has been deemed instrumental to exchanging and producing knowledge and to educate globally engaged students for an ever more interconnected and complex world (Roy et al., 2019). Yet for some years now critical perspectives on the development and current orientation of internationalisation have emerged (e.g., Stein, 2019; Adriansen & Madsen, 2019), expressing concern about the risk of reproduction of already uneven global hierarchies through mainstream internationalisation activities, particularly in institutions of the Global North and Western/ized higher education institutions. Within Europe, mobility tends to be oriented towards an only rather small group of countries with flows of students streaming from more marginal to centre places, creating clear disparities between countries in terms of an uneven spread of international students (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Wealthier countries are favoured study destinations compared to their counterparts in the south, and students from Western Europe show less interest in studying in eastern European countries (Rivza & Teichler, 2007).

The above points towards the importance of exploring the spatial aspects of student mobility. A geographical perspective can, first of all, help us to map patterns and flows of students. We can trace the geographic movements of students, following them between regions and countries. In classic migration theory, we would simply analyse certain push and pull factors for a decision whether or not to move from one place to another. What would remain unexplored is the content of the line between the two places. The content of this line manifests an interesting space for exploration as it holds much meaning and experiences (Cresswell, 2006). Thus, in this chapter, we seek to understand qualitatively what lies beneath such flows and patterns. Recent writings have increasingly focused on place in terms of particular destinations students choose (Beech, 2014, 2019) because of, for example, shared culture (Nachatar Singh et al., 2014), social networks and bonds (Beech, 2015; Geddie, 2013), or accumulating cultural capital used as a mark of distinction (Prazeres, 2018; Findlay et al., 2012). This chapter identifies how geographical imaginaries (Said, 1978; Appadurai, 1996) play into student teachers' decision making of study and work abroad destinations, and explores how these predominantly collective, historic imaginaries are rooted in complex power relations, global hierarchies and post colonialism. Drawing on two sets of data combining incoming and outgoing student mobility to and from Denmark, we explore student teachers' geographical imaginaries, enclosing their preferences and perceptions of different places. This allows us to analyse students' (implicit) geospatial associations and perceptions of where "good" education and "proper"

knowledge come from. Exploring such geographical imaginaries of prospective international teachers becomes of specific importance and interest as our findings highlight complex, global power relations between the providers of ideas, knowledge and practices and the implementers in specific educational contexts. This is significant in terms of the often presented picture of internationalisation as neutral and its assumed benefits. It is also significant in relation to the critical issue of the physical flow of students from more marginal to wealthier northern countries and the often opposite direction of knowledge transfer (Brooks & Waters, 2011), and recent greater recognition of mobility's role in knowledge production (e. g. Madge et al., 2009, 2015; Jöns, 2015).

## 2 The internationalisation of teacher training

The teaching profession and the education of teachers is strongly locally entrenched and designed around the demands of a particular national professional profile (Sieber & Mantel, 2012). Generally, student teachers belong to the least mobile groups of international students (EHEA, 2015). Yet, the internationalisation of teacher training is receiving increased attention around the globe, which can be perceived as a response to arising pedagogical challenges in a globalised world (Larsen, 2016; Abraham & von Brömssen, 2018). Knight (2008) defines internationalisation more generally as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 21). An important rationale for internationalisation of teacher training is to promote intercultural competence in an attempt to increase teachers' global understanding and their ability to implement such approaches into their classrooms (Cushner, 2007; Phillion et al., 2009). There are calls and aspirations to increase international student mobility for prospective teachers to acquire and understand the advantages of intercultural competences through personal experiences abroad, linking to the rising awareness that teachers are multipliers of mobility and motivators for their future pupils (EHEA, 2015; Sieber & Mantel, 2012, Cushner, 2011). Yet, what happens when teachers from all over the world come together in one place, or when student teachers choose to do a teaching internship in another country? Does this mobility enable meaningful interaction, and does it lead to personal and professional reflection? Or can it also reinforce ethnocentric views about themselves and others? In this regard, it is important to understand the impacts of internationalisation and mobility for prospective teachers as their experiences abroad set the stage for reflection and self-transformation in terms of personal and professional development, knowledge acquisition, and application of skills.

## 3 Methodology

This chapter is based on data collected through ethnographic fieldwork at a Danish higher education institution with incoming international student teachers from 19 countries and amongst 23 Danish student teachers engaging in outgoing mobility to nine different countries. Thus, we draw on two data sets comprising incoming and outgoing mobility to and from Denmark. We use qualitative data collected through the so-called mapping tool (Donnelly et al., 2020), combined with semi-structured individual, pair and small focus group (up to five students) interviews and post study interviews. Donnelly, Gamsu and Whewall (2020) propose a new method, which they call the "mapping tool" aimed to elicit the relational construction of people and places. The tool was developed based on their study into the geographic im/mobilities among higher education students in the UK. Participants create a visual representation of their geographical imaginaries, colouring or marking their perceptions and possible preferences of different localities, which is then followed by an interview approach wherein the participants tell about their maps.

Inspired by this approach, we printed out blank maps of the world, omitting place names. We presented the maps to the participants prior to the interview and asked them to colour them in accordance with a colour key. The two sets of data (incoming: 35 maps; outgoing 20 maps) were carried out separately. The incoming students were presented with the following set of questions: Where do you plan to teach? Where would you like to teach? Where do you think teachers are most respected? Where is the best place to teach? (see map 1). The outgoing students were asked to colour in places based on the following aspects: Places you want to do an internship, places you might consider doing an internship, places you do not wish to do an internship, and places you do not know/care about. All students were free to choose as many places as they wished.

The mapping tool was in both cases used in an integrated way within the interview process and students were asked to narrate their thoughts while colouring the maps. Thus, the students narrated their geographical horizons, which Jensen (2015) conceptualises as "references to geographical places and narratives tied to these places" (p. 44). We gained empirical insight into the students' worldviews and imaginaries by listening to how they portray places and spaces while engaging actively with the map. However, the method is experimental and there are limits to it. For example, it can be argued that these maps are a static representation of the student teachers' spatial understandings; nonetheless, it is still found useful for uncovering their worldviews and their boundary construction of the world in relation to education.

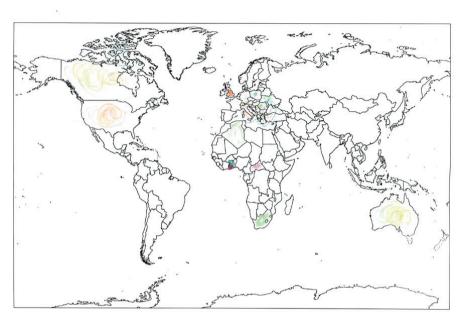


Figure 1: "I think the best place to teach is where there is peace" - Student from Ghana

## 4 Geographical imaginaries

Within the following analysis, we will illustrate both incoming and outgoing students' perspectives and experiences. We portray empirical data about students' imaginaries concerning three interrelated themes: The collective nature of imaginaries, positioning of the "Other" and the "Self", and (global) hierarchical structuring of people, places, education and knowledge.

When Maebh, an incoming student from Ireland, coloured her map in, she reflected on places where she would like to teach and said,

I had a friend that worked in Zambia [...] She was there over the summer, and she just loved it. She said it was so amazing. They were so respectful and kind over there and the children were really willing to learn and she said it was a whole different experience and it is something you have to do in order to fully understand it, so I think that'll be cool, I think it'll be nice to be able to say that you've done that.

While Maebh studied for one semester in Denmark, friends of hers studied at an institution in Finland. Based on their stories, she added, "The teaching system is one of the best in the world, it seems to be they are the unspoken heroes of teacher education, it seems to be inclusive". Caja, an outgoing Danish teacher student, studying for one semester in Norway, had also considered studying in Finland. Her comment holds similar ideas as those of Maebh's friends. She said, "At some point, they [the Finns] were elected as the best public school [in the

world] and I thought it would be interesting to experience the differences between our and their teacher education".

Even though imagination is generally thought of being more of individual nature, geographical imaginaries are not merely representational but are held to be performative in nature as the stories told cause people to act in relation to and through such imaginaries. Imaginaries about other places and lives circulate among people and through their social networks. Salazar (2011, p. 576) describes historically laden and socio-culturally constructed imaginaries as

socially shared and transmitted (both within and between cultures) representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices.

Historically laden and socio-culturally constructed imaginaries are often at the root of many journeys (Salazar, 2011). Students receive information from their social network or university webpages, playing into their imagined experience of being an international student and other geographical imaginaries about their study destination more widely (Beech, 2014). Many of the incoming international students, for instance, knew other students who had studied in Denmark. Additionally, by studying together for one semester, international student teachers learn from each other and hear about other education systems around the world, constructing geographical imaginaries about such places. Especially previous students' experiences seemed to be influential for the Danish outgoing student teachers in choosing and rejecting specific places for being either "useful in the future" or "just a vacation". Furthermore, descriptions of schools, pedagogy, culture, possibilities of taking vacations, trips, and climate were highly influential on the students' final choices. Josephine (see map 2), an outgoing student explained, "It's what I've heard from friends. The ones who have been to Peru and Ghana [...] – it's been an amazing trip. [They said] 'We were just tanning every day. We did this and that.' Also the ones in the Philippines. But there wasn't any teaching and preparation. They didn't learn a thing about that". Josephine herself eventually went to Iceland, which she considered to be more like Denmark and thus a place she could learn more from visiting. Hence, the geographical imaginaries that students construct relationally also influence what they expect they can learn from studying or teaching in particular places, implicitly mirroring global hierarchies of knowledge.

As marketing strategies, universities often build their identities around the place they are located at, which is present already in their very names. Individual higher education institutions develop distinctive place identities, where place and geographical location become central to themselves (Beech, 2019). The Danish higher education institution from our study emphasises that it sees a significant benefit in being part of a connected Europe and a strong Nordic region. The institution states that the academic programmes offered to represent a unique Nordic perspective, providing an excellent opportunity for

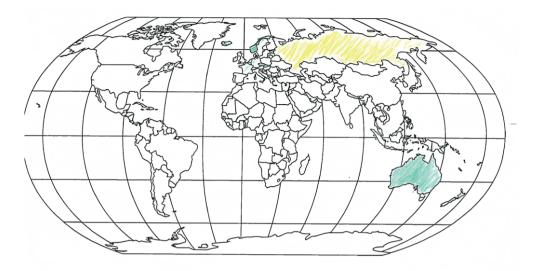


Figure 2: Josephine

international student teachers to learn about the famous Scandinavian welfare model. Consequently, a Scandinavian or Nordic education is constructed as being highly valuable. Many of the incoming students echoed these discourses throughout the mapping tool narratives. Students specifically linked Denmark as their choice of study and work destination with their future professions as teachers. Paula from Spain (see map 3), for instance, said, "We have always learned that Nordic countries are the best places for teachers. Where the education is more valued, more dynamic, more innovative", and Shoma from Japan mentioned, "Nordic country is very famous for high level of education system".

Most incoming students described Denmark as being known for its good education system, often referring to the Nordic or Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) in general. Many incoming students reduced their home countries to inferior places, describing the education they received in Denmark as better. They were encouraged also by the Danish institution selling their unique Nordic education to prospective international students on their webpage. Consequently, many of the students' home countries were "othered" as moving to a Scandinavian country to study (or work) would enable students to receive a highly valued Western education, enabling them to improve their social status (Beech, 2014).

Several outgoing Danish students shared this idea of Denmark and the Nordic countries as highly ranked in an imagined hierarchy of educational systems. This imagined hierarchy influenced where the students chose to either study or teach depending on what they wanted to gain from the trip. Some of the outgoing students, for instance, wanted to experience something "completely different" from the Danish system, which they imagined

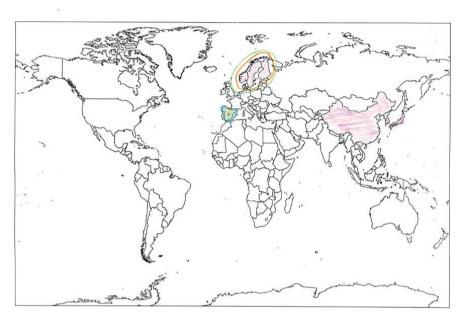


Figure 3: Paula

would be possible in for example the Philippines or African countries, but also in countries such as China or Georgia. Stine, an outgoing Danish student, chose to go to Tanzania, and reflected that she had experienced something completely different compared to if she went to, for instance, Sweden. Stine said, she "Wanted to experience something that is SO different from what I and what we do. Both to be inspired by it but also to be confirmed that... that the way I want to be a teacher is the right way" (see map 4). If they wanted to learn something for their future practice, something they believed they could more actively use as teachers, the outgoing students were however more likely to choose what they considered to be countries with similar educational systems such as Norway, Iceland or the Faroe Islands. Thus, for both incoming and outgoing students, geographical imaginaries about educational systems played a crucial role within their decision-making.

Said (1978) was the first one to coin the term imaginative geography. In his work "Orientalism", he used it to describe the binary distinction between the West and the East. While Asian nations were perceived as irrational, distant and defeated, European nations were instead considered powerful. The West, as the more dominant of the two, created and produced representations of the "Other", or exotic East. One of the characteristic traits of colonialism is that it created inferiority, producing hegemonic epistemology and denying (epistemic) diversity, which necessitated the "Other", considered irrational and uncivilised (Breidlid, 2013). Said (1978) explains that there happens a "universal of designing in one's mind a familiar space which is ours and an unfamiliar space beyond which that is theirs" (p. 54). His idea of imaginative geography can work across contexts and any comparison between the unfamiliar "theirs" and familiar "ours" (Beech, 2014),

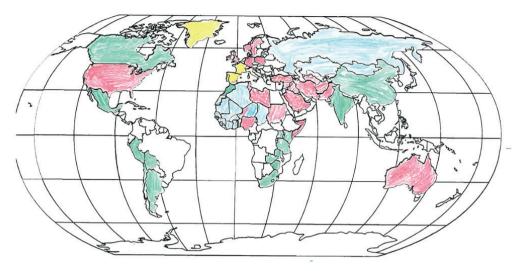


Figure 4: Stine

offering a perspective on not only images of the "Other" but also of the "Self" (Valentine, 2014; Kölbel, 2020). During a focus group interview with incoming students from Ukraine, Larysa said,

I would also like to work as a teacher in China and Japan, first in China, because I have lots of friends who tried that and their stories and experiences they have brought back with them to our country. I am proud that I know these people and that they try to apply the knowledge they got in our country and not elsewhere, so that they really try to improve our education system.

We can read in Larysa's account how she establishes an imagined picture of an overseas education through the stories of her peers. She perceives her friends' experiences and acquired knowledge from those places abroad as beneficial to improve their own education system. In a focus group interview with incoming students from Georgia, one of them explained that one of the reasons she wanted to be an international student was to learn about other systems to be able to compare, take things with her and change the situation in her home country. Both students reduce their home countries to an inferior place, implicitly categorising the places hierarchically. Danish outgoing students also expressed that an aim of studying or teaching abroad was to be able to compare and be inspired by other ways of doing and understanding education. Although they were excited to experience other educational systems, they did not necessarily expect to learn much about teaching, pedagogy or didactics. During an interview, Josephine, the outgoing student we have already met above, said,

There is something in my head asking me "what would I be doing in Africa? Can they teach me anything? [...] what can they give me that I can bring home and use in my practice?" And I have difficulties seeing what I can bring home from Africa because they are so far behind with their educational system.

Josephine expresses a perception of African countries as inferior to her home country Denmark. We can read in several of the empirical accounts of both incoming and outgoing students' an implied hierarchical structuring of places and educational systems (see Kölbel, 2020), which seems to play an (implicit) impactful role in their decision-making and imagined valuable learning and development of their teacher professionalism.

Most prominently among the countries where the incoming students would like to teach were Denmark, Australia, and Finland. Denmark was also coloured in by the majority of students as the best place to teach, which they linked to their experiences throughout their stay. Interestingly, students from Switzerland, Germany and Australia named their own countries the best place to teach. Sadie (see map 5), an incoming student from Australia, chose places in her home country where she would like to teach, for instance, on the Queensland Coast because "It was nice and sunny". Sadie could also imagine teaching somewhere in Indonesia and continued saying, "It's kind of a poor country so it would be nice to teach some kids English [...] and it looks so beautiful". Her friend Hailey had been in Cambodia for volunteer work, and when reflecting on the question of where teachers may be most respected, she referred as well to Indonesia, and said,

Maybe especially international teachers are probably more respected in this area because of the poverty I have seen, and so, I feel like, they liked it when people come to volunteer and teach students about other cultures and teach them English because they know it's gonna benefit them in the future.

When telling about her map, Alba (see map 5), an incoming student from Spain, said, "I would like to teach about sexual education and personal development, and I think the southest countries are the places where always need this kind of education, so I think I would like to teach there". On her map, she drew a triangle pinpointing down to what she considers the "southest" places.

An incoming student from Georgia coloured South Africa green and commented, "Because it is a developing country, not really well-developed, so maybe I could be one of the people who could help them to reach the goal to be a developed country and to have a good educational system". Galina, an incoming student from Russia, reflected, "Africa, it's not a really rich country. I think education for them is like something really special, and I think, and I hope and I am almost really sure that they really respect their teachers because for them it's not like common, it's not for everybody". The narratives of the incoming students show certain collective ideas and complex imaginings of Asian nations and predominantly African countries as inferior. While expressing imagined experiences about teaching "them", the students position themselves in a superior role, imagining helping "them in need".

These views were shared by the outgoing students, who also wanted to "do good", specifically in Global South countries. A few students expressed a dream of working in or starting a school in countries which they perceived as "being in need". Stine and Lise, two outgoing Danish students, spent six weeks in Tanzania and spoke about building a library

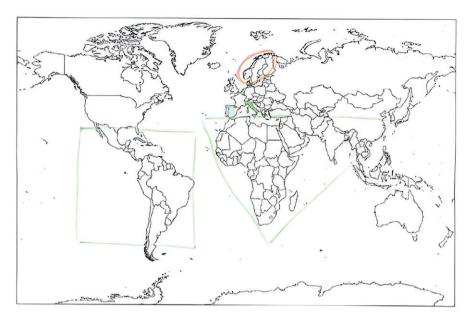


Figure 5: Alba

there. Both understood reading fiction as important and explained how it would stimulate pupils' imagination, which they felt the pupils, they taught during their stay lacked in. While talking about her map, the outgoing student Josephine (see map 5) pointed to the African continent and said.

I've already talked a bit about this idea about building schools or developing schools. It is probably in this area. [...] Yes, Africa and Greenland [...] I think there is a big potential for development there. It could also be here in Asia. This is Indonesia, right? It could also be Brazil, that is, South America.

These conceptions, both of the incoming and outgoing students, bring to the forefront postcolonial discourses of power and academic imperialism, reinforcing popular beliefs and prejudices, and within our context playing key to developing perceptions of people and places (Beech, 2014). Geographical imaginaries can become crucial factors in both forging bonds within groups and differentiating groups, creating boundaries between them. Often places are classified or categorised by geographical imaginaries as better than others, hence positioning places hierarchically, becoming commonly involved in processes of othering (Brooks, 2019; Watkins, 2015).

#### 5 Conclusion

We used the mapping method combined with students' narratives to elicit knowledge about socio-spatial hierarchies in which international student teachers' perceptions and decisions about where to work and study are enclosed (Donnelly et al., 2020). International student teachers were interesting candidates to explore complex imaginative geographies that influence their decision of where to study and work and what places around the world they may perceive as "good" places in terms of "good" education. At the beginning of this chapter, we posed the following questions: What happens when student teachers from all over the world come together in one place or when student teachers choose to do a teaching internship in another country? Does this mobility enable meaningful interaction and does it lead to personal and professional reflection? Or can it also reinforce ethnocentric views about themselves and others?

Based on our empirical data, we showed how students' imaginative geographies of people and places were influenced by postcolonial ideology. The binary distinctions between an "us" and "them", creating "our" world and a distinct "other" were apparent throughout both incoming and outgoing students' narratives with reinforced discourses of academic imperialism and global hierarchies. Among both groups of students, there was a clear academic imperialism relating to choosing Denmark over other places by portraying Scandinavian countries, and Western education more generally as more innovative and developed compared to other places. The students' narratives within both sets of data mirror implicit, underlying hierarchies of (global) knowledge. We come to see that while "international" experiences can have a reflective and transformative potential, the differences student teachers encounter while studying abroad can also reinforce ethnocentric views about themselves and others. Overall, this chapter seeks to push the boundaries of how we think about the effects of higher education internationalisation and globalisation processes within educational contexts.

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