



International student migration and the postcolonial heritage of European higher education: perspectives from Portugal and the UK

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Abstract

Whilst the presence of international students from so-called ‘developing’ or ‘newly industrialised’ countries has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in European higher education, few scholars have explored the underlying postcolonial trajectories that facilitate student migration to many European countries today. In this article, we seek to narrow this gap by critically engaging with the postcolonial heritage of European higher education and the ways in which it informs much student migration in today’s era of neoliberal globalisation. We propose a three-fold approach to reading this postcolonial heritage of higher education which comprises its historical, epistemic, and experiential (or ‘lived’) dimensions. Whilst such an approach requires a close examination of existing postcolonial theory in higher education studies, we also draw on qualitative research with student migrants in Portugal and the UK to show how the postcolonial heritage of European higher education is negotiated in everyday contexts and may become constitutive of students’ identity formations.

Keywords Student migration · Europe · Higher education · Postcolonialism · Heritage · UK · Portugal

Introduction

Over the past two decades, student migration to Europe (i.e. EU) for the purpose of pursuing higher education (HE) has increased significantly and become an important political, social,

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cultural, and economic agenda (Consterdine and Everton 2012). The benefits of students and university graduates as skilled migrants are clearly recognised by most European countries as they are seen to meet labour demands, bring innovation into specific industries and, given they have generally good language skills, contribute to social integration (Raghuram 2013). At the same time, student migrants are valued as important contributors to the educational and economic landscapes of Europe. For example, it is estimated that in the UK, Europe's leading and highest fee-charging HE host country, international students will contribute up to £12 billion to the national economy by 2020 (Sachrajda and Pennington 2013). The economic impact these (predominantly non-European) students have on the financial revenues of universities, city councils, and businesses in the UK and elsewhere has been repeatedly criticised as a giant marketisation project which not only devalues the status of international students as 'cash cows', but also emulates wider global hegemonies of economic power and knowledge capital between the 'Global North' and the so-called 'developing world' (Findlay et al. 2011).

Whilst much literature in the field holds up the view that international student migration is a 'normal' by-product of neoliberal globalisation, many scholars have employed postcolonial theory to chart the contentious and uneven spheres of knowledge and power international student migrants traverse and inhabit (Rizvi et al. 2006; Stein and Andreotti 2016). Postcolonial theory is not a clear-cut approach. It comprises a wide array of theories that have emerged over the past 40 years from the critical engagement with the oppressive practices of (former) colonisers that have impacted, and continue to impact the social, political, and cultural fabric of the (formerly) colonised. According to Rizvi (2007), postcolonial theory makes valuable contributions in exploring how social, political, economic, and cultural practices continue to be located within processes of cultural domination in international HE.

In this article, we seek to pick up on these postcolonial approaches towards international student migration and HE in Europe. We employ the notion of 'postcolonial heritage' to refer to a complex set of processes, policies, practices, and structures of feeling that permeate international student migration to European (and wider 'western') HE today.

The notion of 'postcolonial heritage' is widely associated with 'dissonant' material manifestations and 'uneasy' memories of power and violence exerted by colonial oppressors over their colonial 'subjects' (Giblin 2015). However, rather than being a one-way form of domination, postcolonial theorists have emphasised the ambivalent, hybrid, and transcultural nature of such a heritage in which knowledge is co-constructed reciprocally, and opens up third spaces and contact zones in which identity, culture, and memory are constantly (re-)negotiated (Bhabha 1994; Pratt 1992). This mutual relationship continues to surface in ongoing transnational heritage struggles such as the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement, which saw the mobilisation of students at the Universities of Cape Town and Oxford, demanding the removal of statues by colonial politician Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902) in both cities. Whilst the statues mattered as both material and symbolic manifestations of contested colonial heritage, the movement conjured up wider 'affective politics' around civic rights and decolonisation in South Africa, as well as prevailing inequality and institutional racism in the UK (Knudsen and Andersen 2019).

Scholars also point out that the ongoing mobilisation of post/colonial heritage is inextricably linked to unprecedented mobilities of people, ideas, data, and memories in the era of neoliberal globalisation (i.e. through diaspora, migration, tourism, international education). This, they argue, has led to the emergence of new cross-cultural and hybrid spaces where postcolonial geopolitics of power intersect with the lived and emotional dimensions of culture, memory, and belonging (Delanty 2018; Marschall 2018).

To date, the term ‘heritage’ has been scarcely applied in studies about international HE and student migration. If used at all, it is in an overly generic way, referring to the cultural, ethnic, or national ‘background’ of students migrating for the purpose of HE, or those emanating from settled minority/migrant communities pursuing studies in their country of residence (Johnston-Guerrero and Pecero 2016). In this study, we propose a more nuanced reading of ‘heritage’ which accounts for its multi-sited and hybrid nature, and highlights the links between the historical, geographical, political, cultural, and emotional spheres of international HE and student migration (Madge et al. 2009).

Firstly, we relate the notion of heritage to the historical dimensions of European HE expansion as a modern colonial project which was exported to, and imposed on, the racially, culturally, and geographically distant ‘Other’. More than just a historical treatise, this understanding of heritage requires a critical engagement with current Eurocentric conceptions of HE as something that is ‘migrating’ itself as a commodity or ‘soft power’ in the age of neoliberal globalisation. This section is complemented by a closer examination of how colonial heritage relates to recent developments of HE internationalisation in Portugal and the UK.

Secondly, and related to the previous point, we discuss the epistemic heritage of European HE as a powerful system of knowledge, constructed in contrast to, and conflict with, non-European ‘intellectual traditions’. The mastery of such knowledge systems is often expected of, and imposed on, student migrants from overseas, and likewise, they are seen as the ‘gold standard’ by non-western HE providers as a pathway to meet the requirements of an increasingly stratified global ‘eduscape’. This intangible epistemic heritage of European HE has thus real pedagogical implications and influences the ways in which higher learning, teaching, and scholarship takes place across the world today.

Thirdly, we propose the idea of experiential (or ‘lived’) heritage to make sense of the ways in which students form, interpret, and negotiate their own cultural identities as temporary migrants or members of established minority communities within postcolonial contexts. Students’ lived experiences reveal complex processes in which postcolonial heritage is being constantly (and often tacitly) constructed, reinvented, and performed through everyday social practices and cultural encounters in European HE. Through this approach, we join scholars who recognise the hybrid and ambivalent nature of such heritage, and who acknowledge the interconnection between heritage formation and the construction of cultural identities through lived experience (Biehl et al. 2015). To illustrate some of these processes, we draw on interviews with student migrants enrolled in degree programmes at universities in Portugal and the UK, two countries with a long-standing and contested colonial heritage.

Importantly, we consider these three dimensions of ‘postcolonial heritage’ not as separate entities, but as strongly interconnected and interdependent. Put together, they form an original and useful conceptual approach which adds new insights to the study of student migration and the internationalisation of HE more widely. Like other tangible and intangible forms of heritage (i.e. historical monuments, cultural traditions and values, universal ‘world heritage’), postcolonial HE is characterised by uneven power relations and contested historical processes of selection, interpretation, and evaluation which are, or can be, deeply hegemonic and Eurocentric. By examining international student migration as one manifestation of such postcolonial heritage, we also contribute to a growing body of scholarly work which moves away from static interpretations of heritage towards more mobile, multi-sited, and transnational analyses (Delanty 2018).

For the sake of clarity, we employ the term ‘student migrants’ instead of the more commonly used designation ‘international students’. This is because the latter has been

increasingly critiqued for its emphasis on nationality as the sole determinant of trans- and internationally mobile students. As such, it fails to account for the complex configuration of student identities beyond nationality (i.e. in relation to age, ethnicity, gender, place, etc.) and equally tends to overlook the ways in which student migration is tied into other concurrent forms of global migration (Findlay et al. 2017; Ploner 2017).

The colonial heritage of European higher education

The history of colonial HE is well documented and reveals a complex pattern of hegemonic processes and unequal power relations that have characterised its global expansion. Designed as institutions of empire and instruments of power, universities were set up by the Spanish clergy in the colonial centres of South and Central America as early as the mid-1500s. The prime purpose of this first wave of colonial universities was to bolster Christian mission among the indigenous population as well as to meet the demand for administrative workforce for the expanding empire (Peters 2017). The proliferation of missionary and administrative influence was also the main agenda for British colonisers in their overseas territories which was mainly pursued through a utilitarian policy of ‘indirect rule’ in which the handling of (higher) education was devolved to missionaries and local administrators. According to Woldegiorgis (2017) and Hall (2008), the main motive behind British colonial HE during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was to produce local elites able to facilitate colonial administration rather than ‘enlightening’ indigenous societies. Although there are numerous examples of nineteenth-century university foundations across the British empire (e.g. Sierra Leone 1827; Cape Town 1828; Mumbai, Calcutta and Madras 1857), a significant number of British universities, particularly in Africa, were founded during the period of decolonisation after WWII. Whilst these latter institutions were established to support the colonised nations on their way to self-government, most of them continued to be dependent on their previous colonisers in terms of structure, curriculum, and general policy orientation. In Livsey’s (2016) view, these late colonial universities can be seen as direct predecessors of various ‘capacity-building’ schemes characteristic of ongoing UK ‘international development’ policies.

The institutionalisation of HE overseas was less pertinent for other major colonial powers such as the Dutch, Portuguese, or French, the latter pursuing a highly selective policy of cultural and linguistic assimilation in their colonies through educational means. Whilst the few universities established by the Portuguese during the twentieth century in Brazil, Angola, and Mozambique mainly catered for Portuguese settlers and their descendants, the French found it to be more effective to provide advanced education for colonial elites in Paris or Bordeaux and only established few, and highly specialised, further and HE institutions within their colonies (Peters 2017).

The recruitment of a selected colonial elite to the educational centres of Europe was a common practice among imperialists, particularly during the period of ‘decolonisation’ and aimed at supporting the transition of colonial dominions to semi-/independence from the 1940s onwards. This recruitment strategy has been identified as a precursor of present-day international student migration to Europe and the ‘west’ more generally, and has been criticised as a continuation of colonial power relations, now embedded in ‘soft power’, ‘charity’, and ‘development’ discourses (Stein and Andreotti 2016). For example, Lomer (2017) asserts that the UK’s current international reputation for high-quality HE can be seen as a residual effect of

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperial networks that facilitated flows from the colonies to Britain in the form of bureaucratic training and the cultural indoctrination of ‘native’ elites. Drawing on current UK policy documents, she argues that this colonial logic of student recruitment lives on in a prevailing, yet often misguided, ‘diplomacy’ and ‘soft power’ rationale in which international students are seen to be “...of long-term benefit to the UK, because they develop positive attitudes and lasting ties which lead them to exert influence in Britain’s interest in their home country.” (Lomer 2017, 595). It is also worth mentioning that, although having fallen behind the USA in recent years, the UK and France are still considered the prime European countries from which future world leaders (many emanating from ‘developing’ or ‘newly industrialising’ countries) receive their HE degrees (Busby 2018).

The critical engagement with the colonial heritage of HE has seen a strong utilisation of postcolonial theory in educational research in recent years and has been closely associated with current discourses around dominant neoliberal and neocolonial agendas that characterise the internationalisation of HE today. These critical accounts claim that HE has fallen prey to the forces of a neoliberal global market economy where traditional cultures of learning, intellectual enquiry, and debate are being replaced with a massified knowledge economy emphasising student recruitment, strategic planning, and performativity (Olssen and Peters 2005). In this context, international student recruitment has been repeatedly described as a source of income generation for western universities that emulates elitist colonial power/knowledge structures on a global scale. Likewise, the establishment of overseas branch campuses and transnational degree programmes by some western universities in newly industrialised countries exemplifies this trend, and has been critiqued as a form of neo- or re-colonisation which deepens inequality (Ling et al. 2014; Waters 2012).

The neoliberal logic of international HE is not only reflected in the competitive recruitment of the ‘best and brightest’ (and perhaps most affluent) overseas students to European/western universities, but also surfaces in the prevailing discrimination of lower-income domestic social groups which generally, but not exclusively, emanate from minority communities with migration and/or colonial background. For example, and despite well-intended policies of diversification and ‘widening participation’, numerous studies show that HE access and attainment among young British school leavers with black and minority ethnic (BME) background are much lower than their white middle class peers (Richardson 2015). A similar picture emerges in other European countries such as France and Germany where the number of students with both recent and long-standing migration histories remains significantly low (Duru-Bellat et al. 2008).

Postcolonial heritage and the internationalisation of HE—Portugal and the UK in context

Regarding the two particular cases discussed in this article, Portugal and the UK, it is important to highlight that, notwithstanding similarities rooted in their colonial histories and connections (Luijten-Lub et al. 2005), many differences mark the way in which colonial heritage still shapes HE in these countries. Unlike Britain, Portugal largely failed in establishing universities in their overseas territories in the past and educated their colonial elites ‘at home’ (França and Padilla 2016). This historical legacy echoes current trends in HE enrolments in Portugal which sees the majority of migrant students coming from former colonies such as Angola and Brazil (Nada and Araújo 2018b). By contrast, the UK has emerged as Europe’s leading international

HE destination over past decades, attracting a large number of students from across the world. Due to the far-reaching geopolitical influence of British colonialism, it is difficult to establish a clear-cut classification of students who are part of this ‘colonial heritage’. On the one hand, this may relate to temporary student migrants who emanate from former colonies and countries associated with the British Commonwealth, including large parts of Africa, the Indian sub-continent as well as parts of South East and East Asia (UKCISA 2018). On the other hand, the notion of colonial heritage can be applied to students who derive from settled migrant communities in the UK such as large Afro-Caribbean/West Indian, Pakistani, and Indian minority groups, whose participation in HE seems more defined by social rather than geographical mobility and is often characterised by more far-reaching educational disadvantage (Richardson 2015).

In terms of wider HE internationalisation, trends of the two countries also present significant differences. Indeed, one could assert that internationalisation here understood in a market sense as the strategic recruitment of international students, arrived in Portugal with a lag of a few decades compared with the UK and other anglophone countries. Before 2010, internationalisation of HE in Portugal developed in a somewhat ad hoc fashion, without an appropriate legal framework to support HE institutions (Veiga et al. 2007). Only recently has Portugal taken measures to actively promote internationalisation, exemplified in the 2014 government strategy for HE internationalisation (MEC 2014). Similarly, the recognition of the economic benefits of student migration, instrumentalised by the UK in 1980 by withdrawing public subsidies for non-EU students, has become a strategic goal of Portuguese HE only since 2014. Since then, Portuguese HE institutions are entitled to charge differentiated tuition fees to ‘home’ and ‘international’ students, attending to the ‘real cost of education’. Interestingly, and despite having this autonomy, most Portuguese universities continue to charge lower fees to students from Portuguese-speaking overseas countries. Whilst this may be linked to bilateral post/colonial obligations, it can also be seen as a way to incentivise transnational student migration and to address Portugal’s relative lack of recognition on the global HE market.

At present, and as observed by França et al. (2018, 3), “the dynamics of international student mobility are influenced by two competing forces, Europeanisation and Lusophony”. In this sense, HE internationalisation in Portugal is caught between an economic imperative driven by a wider EU agenda (Harris 2011), and Portugal’s close relationship with its former colonies based on cooperation ideals (Rosa et al. 2004). By contrast, internationalisation of HE in post-Brexit UK could see a process of De-Europeanisation and the strengthening of historical bonds with its former colonies. A strategic document titled ‘The Road to 2030’, recently issued by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU 2019), clearly points in this direction by advocating increased networking, capacity building, and performance enhancement across Commonwealth countries.

The epistemic heritage of European higher education

Having outlined both the colonial roots and legacies of European HE, with a special emphasis on Portugal and the UK, we now move to exploring the epistemic heritage associated with European HE. With ‘epistemic heritage’, we refer to Eurocentric, and thus discriminatory, intangible traditions of thought, reasoning, and knowledge production that originate in modern Europe and continue to influence, if not dominate, HE pedagogies, curricula, and academic practices across the world. Driven by post-enlightenment values of ‘progress’, the historical expansion of

HE across the colonised world was characterised by the proliferation of everything that is advanced, good, and civilized measured in European terms. This ‘colonial imagination’ (London 2002) was driven by educational interventions and lingers on in prevailing ‘development’ discourses in which economic, social, and political change in former colonies are still measured against ‘western’ standards. Researching the legacies of colonial HE in South Africa, and drawing on Spivak’s notion of ‘epistemic violence’, Heleta (2016, 2) writes that,

...one of the most destructive effects of colonialism was the subjugation of local knowledge and promotion of the Western knowledge as universal knowledge. European scholars have worked hard for centuries to erase the historical, intellectual and cultural contributions of Africa and other parts of the ‘non-Western’ world to our common humanity. They have done this as part of the white supremacist project.

Whilst the far-reaching historical dimensions of such epistemic violence or ‘epistemicide’ (de Sousa Santos 2016) continue to be explored, they have also prompted more conductive and inclusive approaches to international HE over recent years. One example is the recent call by student activists and progressive scholars to ‘decolonise’ curricula by challenging subject knowledge that is still predominantly Eurocentric, white, male, and middle class (Gopal 2017). Another example is the continuous drive of many western universities to ‘internationalise’ their curricula (and other operational areas) so as to manage increased cultural diversity and promote inclusion on university campuses (Caruana and Ploner 2011). Harnessing ‘intercultural’ learning and teaching, Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) can be positively interpreted as a move away from hegemonic neocolonial forms of knowledge formation towards the promotion of ‘cross-cultural skills’, ‘intercultural understanding’, and ‘global citizenship’ (Leask 2009). However, and whilst stressing openness towards subaltern forms of reasoning, internationalisation has been repeatedly criticised for its underlying neoliberal rationale which is primarily about student recruitment and the enhancement of graduate employability in increasingly competitive global labour markets (Waters 2012). In this reading, the decolonisation of dominant knowledge through culturally sensitive and inclusive curriculum reform is reduced to the proliferation of competitive ‘cultural’ or ‘soft’ skills among (predominantly white middle-class) graduates. Part of this agenda is that western universities provide social or educational volunteering opportunities for their students in ‘developing’ countries, which has been criticised by some as a form of CV-boosting, neocolonial ‘voluntourism’ rather than a genuinely reciprocal form of internationalisation (Butcher and Smith 2015).

The pressure to ‘internationalise’ is equally felt by universities in emerging postcolonial or newly industrialised countries as a way to keep up with the growing demands for ‘excellence’ and ‘world class reputation’. As Gyamera and Burke (2018, 253–54) observe, this drive to gain prestige and thus ‘belong’ to the global HE market is deeply problematic, since “[p]restige...is distributed by narrow criteria produced through western-oriented, neoliberal and neo-colonial perspectives of ‘excellence’ in the fields of teaching and research.” In other words, the ambition to internationalise HE in so-called ‘developing’ countries primarily means to ‘westernise’ their university systems, and thus perpetuates the myth of epistemic superiority of European/western knowledge systems (Leite 2010).

Despite growing attempts to decolonise and internationalise curricula and student experience more widely, the exposure to discriminatory epistemic violence is still a common experience among a growing number of student migrants who pursue their studies at prestigious European (or western) universities (Nada and Araújo 2018a). Surprisingly, such

epistemic discrimination is also reflected in much academic literature on ‘international’ higher learning, teaching, and scholarship which is dominated by ‘deficit’ discourses where student migrants are primarily seen to ‘adapt’, ‘adjust’, or ‘acculturate’ themselves to taken-for-granted ‘academic standards’ (Taylor and Ali 2017). For Marginson (2014, 8), this ‘adjustment paradigm’ is in itself deeply rooted in European intellectual tradition and echoes the long emphasis on social order in functionalist social science, “...which prioritises normalisation and assimilation of migrant populations, including temporary migrants such as mobile workers and international students.” These highly ethnocentric views on adjustment have real consequences on the social and educational experiences of international student migrants. For example, Ryan and Louie (2007) argue that students from countries with Confucian heritage cultures (e.g. China) studying in the west tend to be broadly characterised as passive and dependent surface learners who are prone to plagiarism and lack critical thinking skills. These deficit constructions are so powerful that, despite their previous academic achievements, students internalise these negative associations as a perceived personal weakness. This stigmatisation of ‘international’ students based on a highly limited understanding of their ‘heritage’ or ‘national background’ can only be countered by a genuinely sensitive approach to internationalisation which recognises diversity and provides what Phipps and Barnett (2007) term ‘epistemological hospitality’—the accommodation of less familiar epistemic traditions in higher learning, teaching, and scholarship.

The experiential postcolonial heritage of higher education—student narratives from Portugal and the UK

As indicated in the previous sections, the experiences of students migrating in pursuit of European/western ‘world class’ HE tend to reflect prevailing and highly complex post-colonial power/knowledge structures. Equally complex is the assessment of the motivations that lie behind student migration from ‘newly industrialising’ countries to western/European HE systems. Recent scholarship has questioned the assumption that international student mobility is solely determined by seeking competitive advantage through cultural capital accumulation. On the contrary, international student migration can also be seen as an escape from restrictive social environments, limited life prospects, political oppression, and economic precariousness, and can thus serve as a springboard for long-term international career mobility (Findlay et al. 2017). Seen from this angle, education-motivated migration is closely intertwined with other concurrent forms of labour migration, exile, and diaspora.

Central to the understanding of students’ migration decisions and experiences is the way in which ‘going abroad’ impacts on the formation of their personal, social, and cultural identities and how HE participation contributes to the formation of their present and future selves. Here, numerous studies have challenged Eurocentric and neocolonial paradigms of ‘adjustment’ and ‘acculturation’ by stressing agency-driven forms of identity formation among student migrants. For example, Marginson (2014) argues that international students are not just passively adjusting to unfamiliar social and educational environments, but actively choose and utilise mobility to alter and coordinate their ‘space of possibles’. In doing so, they develop a ‘centring self’ that sustains identity whilst managing hybridity and cultural plurality, and thereby shape a mix of identity from a larger portfolio of socially defined choices. Whilst these may relate to the shared identity of nationality or citizenship, students variously identify in terms of religion, class, gender, locality, kinship, politics, or their professional interests.

Whilst the prevailing ‘adjustment paradigm’ is being increasingly challenged, one must acknowledge that students with a specific colonial heritage may have different experiences than those with weaker or no colonial ties. For example, the colonial heritage of a common language, shared educational traditions, long-standing cultural and economic exchanges, or existing family and migration networks, can have a significant impact on the ways in which student migrants construct, and negotiate, their social and educational identities.

To shed light on student identity formations in postcolonial contexts, in the following, we draw on narratives of students studying in Portugal and the UK who we identified as having distinctive postcolonial connections to their place of study. In doing so, we explore some of the ways in which they project their social, cultural, and educational identities against the wider canvas of their shared colonial heritage. The narratives we selected stem from a series of 26 biographical interviews with student migrants as well as domestic students with colonial heritage, which we conducted over recent years, and which were part of three separate research projects.¹ What all three projects had in common was the focus on lived experiences of students in Portugal and the UK, and exploring the ways in which they construct their social, cultural, and educational identities at different stages in their studies, as well as in relation to their wider biographical trajectories. The notion of postcolonial heritage emerged as a strong meta-narrative when analysing students’ reflections. On average, interviews lasted about 70 min; they were accurately transcribed, coded, and subjected to rigorous narrative analysis (Riessman 2008). To safeguard the anonymity of participants, we have replaced their real names with pseudonyms in this article.

For temporary student migrants, a sense of shared postcolonial heritage may already become manifest in the physical and social environment of the study destination. The new, yet often strangely familiar environment may thus help some students to settle in and develop a sense of place and belonging, or even a ‘home from home’. For example, Valéria, a Brazilian PhD student at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, reflects on the first impressions she gained at her study location:

This old part of [the city of] Coimbra is identical to the old part of my city. Therefore, I virtually felt at home, it felt like I was walking through the old part of [my city], São Luís. I didn’t have any shock, the food was also very similar to the food from Brazil and, especially, the food from the Northeast, which is my region, because we had a very strong Portuguese influence (Valeria)

Likewise, Rita, who attended a Portuguese school in São Tomé before moving to Portugal, illustrates how a colonial educational heritage may help create a strong sense of familiarity with the host country, leading students to feel comfortable in the new environment, and to avoid some of the difficulties when transitioning to university,

I did my secondary level at a Portuguese school. There are two Portuguese schools [in São Tomé] and education is the same as here, the schools are assessed by the Portuguese government and not by the one of São Tomé. [...] When you leave São Tomé and come here for university, it is [a] completely different [experience]. [...] Since I attended a Portuguese school, I don’t notice that [difference as] much as the other students do. (Rita)

Besides this familiarity of place and the surrounding built, culinary and educational heritage, many students emphasised the significance of existing social and family networks at the study

destination which have been established through long-standing colonial connections and previous migration flows. Apart from few exceptions (Beech 2015), the significance of social and family migrant networks in the context of student migration and destination choice has been largely ignored in scholarship, but constitutes a recurrent narrative of students when it comes to describing their sense of place and the formation of their social identities. For example, Hamid, who moved from Pakistan to a university city in the north of England in pursuit of an MA in Economics, elaborates on the decision behind this move,

OK, well, ... what happened was actually I got a few friends and relatives here, in this area, in [name of city]. So, when I was coming from the Pakistan they suggested me 'well you can come here and we'll help you out with your residence and those matters' and you always look around if you know somebody there in that area. You'll probably like to be there and live around them. (Hamid)

In a similar vein, Rita, a student from São Tomé who arrived in Portugal with her twin sister, was welcomed by other family members who were already living in Portugal. She recalls,

In Lisbon, we were welcomed by an uncle and our sister came to meet us here in Coimbra, where we already had accommodation, she had already rented it for us. When we came to Coimbra, we only needed to settle in. (Rita)

This student also notes that existing immigrant networks linked to a shared colonial heritage may attract students to Portugal rather than to other European countries with which they do not share a common past. She says,

Here, there are also a lot of immigrants already. The majority of my family that left the country is here. So, the idea is immediately [to come to] Portugal, mainly because of the language and also because of the relatives that are here. (Rita)

The above quotes clearly indicate that, besides the common language, existing migrant family and social networks play an important role for some students, particularly when it comes to choosing their study destinations abroad. These diasporic networking strategies can be seen as an intrinsic element of a 'lived' postcolonial heritage that accounts for established family bonds and social exchanges between the (former) colonisers and colonised. As such, they may represent what Beech (2015) refers to as the 'normalisation' of international student migration, in which students base their decisions to study abroad by sharing experiences with friends and family members living (or having lived) in the 'host' country. Indeed, Rita's remark about the 'immediacy' of her decision to study in Portugal due to existing family networks can be seen as such a 'normal' act. Whilst practical issues such as shared language, support with accommodation and transition come into play, one has also to account for the affective anchors afforded by family networks that help students to 'settle in' emotionally, to receive love, care, and hospitality, or to overcome feelings of isolation and insecurity often associated with international student migration (Ploner 2018). Observers and marketers of international HE, who reduce student's choice of study destination to the prestige and excellence of receiving institutions, still largely ignore the significance of established transnational social and kin networks, which go beyond the economic argument but emphasise the emotional and affective dimensions underpinning these decisions.

Whilst the significance of existing migrant networks was stressed by some students, others emphasised how their relocation helped them to critically reflect on, and break with, social norms and values in their home countries which were seen as constraining personal development. This formation of alternative identities has been discussed in the literature as a form of transformational (un-)learning which occurs both formally and informally (Nada et al. 2018) and constitutes an important element in the student migrant experience. It becomes evident in the following statements which show that educational migration has a significant impact on how students construct alternative identities. For example, Tania, a student from Angola studying in Portugal, explained,

If I had not left Angola, probably now I would have a son, a husband, [...] I would be *different if I had never left Angola even in terms of personality. Sometime when we have a lot of family protection we end up not being that independent, autonomous, matured.* (Tania)

The acknowledgement of personal transformation and the development of alternative (or multiple) identities is also echoed in the following statement by Tola, a male Nigerian student who studies for an MA in Politics at a UK university. Interestingly, and echoing dominant discourses on international student migration, the notion of ‘cultural adaptation’ constitutes a major theme in his narrative,

I’ve been here for two years, I’ve been able to adapt to the culture, I’ve been able to learn a lot of things, seen a lot of places. I feel like a citizen in that way. So, if you were asked, I’m two different people right now. (Tola)

In a similar vein, Amivi, a Timorese woman studying in Portugal, reflects on how the migration experience has fundamentally changed her way of thinking and learned social behaviour,

Before, I was a person incapable of contradicting someone’s thoughts. [...] After coming to Portugal, when I went to Timor I would not accept anymore ideas that I consider wrong [...] This mentality shocked very much people from Timor. [...] When I returned to Timor, my cousins even told me: ‘Sure, you went to Europe and returned different.’ (Amivi)

The above quotes provide valuable insights into the ways in which students reflect on their personal, social, and educational transformation abroad and how this affects their sense of self and belonging. They showcase different forms of identity formation which emerge in between ‘home’ and ‘away’ and allow students to make informed and meaningful choices about their personal and social values in relation to previously learned or culturally inherited beliefs. Furthermore, they indicate that the formation of cultural identity among student migrants heavily relies on learning processes that Connell et al. (2016) call ‘intellectual labour’—the construction of knowledge that is not bound to a seemingly fixed epistemic heritage system, but is constantly used, developed, and contested within and in between particular contexts.

Student narratives reveal that the geographical distance generated by educational migration is an important, but by no means decisive factor that helps individuals to break from social environments that are recognised as inhibiting or otherwise challenging. For example, Jazmin,

a student of Afro-Caribbean descent who grew up in an ethnically diverse and socially disadvantaged part of Manchester, recounts how her deliberate move to another university town in the North of England has allowed her to make a ‘fresh start’,

I think, it was just a new experience. Moving, not being so close to home and having a fresh start. It was, like, getting to know a new area cos’ I reckon if I stayed in Manchester I just would have got, er, pulled down and end up like my mates and I wouldn’t have done as well... Because in the community that I’m from it’s not exactly the cool thing to be a geek is it? Or...to be so motivated and so wanting to go to university. So yeah, I have, have had to deal with that. (Jazmin)

Asked further about the reasons behind the low level of HE participation in the local community she grew up in, Jazmin shared some interesting thoughts about the differences between ‘old’ and ‘new’ migrant communities when it comes to educational aspiration and attainment:

Well it also depends, like, newer migrants, newer immigrants, they tend to be more committed towards education and improving as obviously that’s why they came here, for the opportunities here. Whereas the people that have been here, like, I’m born here but the people that, like, say their parents have been here and even, um, their families might have been here longer even, no matter what ethnicity, they tend to take the opportunities here for granted. (Jazmin)

Whilst Jazmin’s narrative may not be representative of the wider black and minority ethnic student population in the UK, it reflects long-standing issues around the structural exclusion of established minority communities in UK (higher) education. For these groups, the combination of low income, social immobility, and low educational aspiration is a recurrent theme in research (Richardson 2015) and a direct legacy of social and educational policy shortcomings in post-colonial Britain. As Jazmin’s story suggests, this implies that aspiring young people often have to break from their immediate social environment to develop an alternative social and educational identity.

Somewhat different feelings of exclusion and non-belonging, based on both structural and immediate forms of discrimination, were also perceived by student migrants in Portugal. They are particularly salient in Valéria’s assessment of her experiences at university,

So when we [Brazilians] arrived here for the PhD, we still encountered that barrier of them thinking that they worked better than the Brazilians. (...) There was an academic shock: none of what was being done there [in Brazil] was valued here. (...) Therefore, here there is, inside academia, a certain resistance towards Brazilian students. For a very short time, I got to attend another PhD programme and there was this Nigerian who complaint precisely about that: he felt discriminated against due to his origins. (Valéria)

Valéria’s narrative indicates that forms of epistemic violence, i.e. the assumption that established ‘European’ forms of knowledge are superior to non-European forms, are still rife within her degree programme. It echoes prevailing ‘deficit’ and ‘assimilationist’ approaches towards student migrants which are deep-rooted in the postcolonial epistemic heritage of European HE and rarely consider the emotional impacts this discrimination may have on students’ confidence and sense of belonging (Ryan and Louie 2007).

Unlike some of the previous narratives, which indicate that student identities are reformed by establishing distance towards inherited social and cultural norms ‘at home’, or are constructed in relation to discriminatory local educational expectations and practices, a recurrent narrative theme among other students was the notion of ‘giving something back’ to their communities or countries of origin. In fact, the notion to gain HE skills abroad that can be put into use in one’s community was often a key reason behind students’ migration and academic subject choice. The following quote by Charles, a Zimbabwean student who reads for an MA in international relations at a UK university, is a typical example,

I think to me...it’s one, the most important thing is...I think it [UK HE] will help me contribute to the politics of our country in some way whether at grassroots level, whatever level... At the moment I’m not really bothered about getting a job or whatever. I’m mostly worried about getting to understand the politics and, you know, having experience in how political problems are solved. (Charles)

Similarly, Tola, a Nigerian student of politics at a UK university, states,

We can help everybody live the same like people living right here but the politicians are not the ones, the people are suffering (...) So, this has motivated me, you know...my ambition and make me really want to be doing what I’m doing to be able to make a positive difference in any way and whatever I’m going to do I’m still definitely going to contribute to Africa and help Africa. That’s my dream and that’s my goal, honestly. (Tola)

The recurrent theme of ‘giving something back’ to one’s country of origin allows interesting insights into how student migrants construct their identities and ‘space of possibles’ (Marginson 2014). Seen from a critical perspective, the quotes imply that the skills and knowledge gathered through HE in Europe may be considered more valuable compared with alternative or ‘local’ forms of education in their home countries. As such, they seem to emulate hegemonic postcolonial ‘development’ discourses ingrained in the epistemic heritage of European HE in which social, political, and economic change can only be achieved through the application of such superior expertise. Seen from a different angle, however, the genuine wish of these students to employ their international education to positively contribute to fundamental structural problems in Africa (themselves part of a wider colonial heritage) is a powerful testimony of the student as ‘centring self’ who actively manages ambivalent knowledge systems, hybrid heritages, and alternating forms of belonging within a wider, perhaps more ‘cosmopolitan’, imagination.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to critically discuss the ongoing phenomenon of international student migration in relation to the postcolonial heritage of European HE. To conceptualise European HE within the framework of ‘postcolonial heritage’ is a novel and suitable approach, since it helps to point out some of the complex historical processes that continue to determine educational migration and knowledge formation in today’s globalised world. Like other forms of tangible and intangible heritage, the colonial heritage of HE is characterised by normative and disciplining power-knowledge relations where European/western standards are applied

when it comes to interpret, evaluate, and educate the non-European ‘Other’. As a form of cultural heritage, it also conjures up forms of collective memory which are based on shared history, language, symbols, and learned knowledges, but which are equally subject to ongoing, and highly charged, cultural, and political contestation.

In order to conceptualise the complexities that underpin international student migration in the context of postcolonial HE, we proposed a three-fold, yet interconnected, approach which acknowledges the historical, epistemic, and experiential (or ‘lived’) dimensions of such a heritage. Whilst the first two dimensions seem to confirm the prevailing influence of hegemonic Eurocentrism on the global postcolonial imagination (Stein and Andreotti 2016), the lived experiences of student migrants reveal a more nuanced picture in which HE becomes a meaningful site for the negotiation of postcolonial heritage and the continual (re-)centring of student identities. Rather than rehearsing prevailing narratives of dependency or assimilation, students’ voices speak of agency, resilience, and reflexivity when it comes to navigating these contested, yet often strangely familiar, spaces of knowledge and power. Indeed, our findings reveal that, despite the significant diversity of migrant students’ lived experience of international HE, the historical and epistemic dimensions of postcolonial heritage strongly inform, and intertwine with, the experiential ones. We thus believe that the triadic notion of ‘postcolonial heritage’, as proposed in this article, provides a strong and nuanced framework for exploring the manifold ways in which historical and geopolitical structures of postcolonial power/knowledge intersect with subjective and affective structures of feeling.

Rizvi et al. (2006) remind us that one of the major insights of postcolonial theory is its understanding of the dialectical relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. The former do not simply shape the culture and identities of the latter, but are equally shaped by cultural encounter in a range of complex ways. Nor are the colonised merely ‘cultural dupes’ or ‘innocent bystanders’ in their encounters with the hegemonic processes of colonisation, but are capable of interpreting, accommodating, and resisting dominant discourses. To some extent, this reciprocal logic is reflected in the postcolonial experience of the student migrants whose narratives we presented. However, to date, there is little evidence to suggest that, in their efforts to ‘internationalise’, European/western universities do enough to actively engage with the historical, cultural, and epistemic heritage these individuals bring with them, negotiate, and grapple with in their pursuit of HE. Likewise, there is still little critical reflection on the contested historical legacies of (European) HE as a key facilitator of dominant colonial power structures which seem to resurface in the current neoliberal climate. And yet, for HE institutions in Europe and elsewhere, thinking through postcolonial heritage is not simply about ‘looking back’ in history, but an opportunity to mobilise ambivalent, hybrid and potentially ‘uneasy’ cultural encounters which, in turn, can advance higher learning, teaching, and scholarship. It is against this backdrop, that ongoing efforts to ‘decolonise’ and ‘internationalise’ European HE, remain significant since they recognise connectivity, transnationalism, and reciprocity as intrinsic factors for mutual learning and identity formation in an increasingly mobile world.

Notes

1. Nada, Cosmin I. (2017). *There is no such thing as a ‘typical’ student: A narrative approach to the experience of migrant students in Portugal*. Doctoral Thesis/Research Project, University of Porto. <http://hdl.handle.net/10216/107373>

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