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Recruiting International Students: Analysing the Imaginative Geographies of Three Urban Encounters

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Abstract

International students are a critical source of income for UK universities, and yet reports indicate that their numbers have been in decline since academic year 2010-11 (Universities UK 2014). Consequently, UK universities need to work harder to attract international students than ever before. This paper uses qualitative interviews with international office staff based at UK higher education institutions together with observational research at recruitment events which took place in Hong Kong in 2017 to demonstrate how the urban has a critical role to play in the international student migration industry. The paper showcases three urban encounters in the recruitment process: the higher education recruitment fair; how universities drawing connections between themselves and other urban locations; and by considering how predeparture events mobilise the urban landscape to communicate dynamic learning experiences. The retelling and analysis of these encounters demonstrate how universities, and the UK, create, foster and embed the geographical imaginary in their recruitment processes in order to entice and encourage brand loyalty from prospective students.

Keywords

International student mobilities, youth transitions, urban branding, higher education, urban encounters

Vignette

There is a buzz in the air that brings with it a sensation of excitement and anticipation, it is amplified by the chatter of hundreds of voices all at once. The room is filled with young people, mostly around the age of a ‘typical’ school leaver, often accompanied by their parents. As they race around lifting freebies (pens, badges, leaflets and so forth) each is on a mission, to find out why they should choose one particular university over any other. There are added dimensions at work; many of these young people have just received their Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education and, although many may have accepted offers at UK universities, are flirting with the idea of either ‘trading up’ or revising down their higher education expectations. It is a ‘buyer’s market’, and the UK universities exhibiting at the British Council Higher Education Fair in Hong Kong know this. The need to work quickly to secure commitments from these students is evidenced further by the thrumming of printers as provisional offers are made on the spot.

Introduction

The higher education fair, like the one described above, is a key recruitment method for many UK universities and an ideal time to harness the enthusiasm and anticipation for overseas study. Temenos and McCann (2013) recognise that events such as these are critical moments of “encounter, persuasion and motivation” (p.346) where new knowledges are produced and circulated and are therefore likely to be fundamental to the student decision-making process. Yet, whilst the literatures on the motivations for international student mobilities are well developed, our knowledge of recruitment practices, and the urban spaces in which they take place, is much less so. This paper will seek to rectify this by unpacking the dynamics of these and similar events through an in-depth analysis of observations carried out at recruitment events in Hong Kong in July 2017, together with insights from a series of interviews with international office staff based at UK universities during 2014-15.

The decision to situate the research within this geographical context was first driven by evidence that global cities, such as Hong Kong, are key sites of encounter (Yeoh, 2015), and are significant for outflows of international students. Most school leavers in Hong Kong are unable to access domestic higher education opportunities and so opt to study internationally (Waters & Leung, 2017). Second, the UK higher education system is highly neoliberalised with a strong focus on competition and sourcing alternative income streams – this includes international students who pay significantly higher fees than their local counterparts (Beech, 2019). This has led to a marketized system of international student recruitment and the development of associated migration industries to facilitate their mobilities (Beech, 2018) as defined by Cranston et al (2018).

International students are key urban agents and can have considerable impact upon the cities in which they study. This has ranged from analyses of the importance of the urban in structuring friendship networks for those studying overseas (Robertson, 2018), to their role in facilitating urban change and the emergence of particular businesses or international student spaces (Collins, 2010; Malet Calvo et al., 2017; Malet Calvo, 2018). Furthermore, students more generally can have profound impacts on housing stock within urban spaces through processes of studentification (Holton & Mouat, 2021). The urban is at once the place of encounter (on which see below) but also acts as a proxy for selling another urban experience, one city, as this paper goes on to show, being used creatively to engender a set of feelings and imaginings about another. The urban matters as it is not just the backdrop to a range of marketing performances and strategies but because it is integral to them and has a critical role in how the international student experience is told. However, we know comparatively little

about the role of the urban and how it shapes spaces of student recruitment. Exceptions to this include work by Collins (2012) which considers the geographical distribution of higher education recruitment agencies in urban spaces, and Beech (2019, 2018) which notes that recruitment tends to happen within specific urban contexts.

This paper addresses these complex relationships with the urban using the framework of the encounter, a (after Massey (2005)) 'throwntogetherness' of peoples, things, representations, and places. Cities are critical sites of encounter which can facilitate self-reflection (Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014), build connections with others (Askins, 2016), and shape migration trajectories (Wang & Collins, 2016). However, it is also recognised that the language of the encounter is widely used and covers a variety of social interactions. This draws upon Wilson and Darling (2016) which suggests that encounters are associated with difference, intervention, are momentary or fleeting, and that they produce distinctive spaces and are generative of the urban. These elements are reflected in the discussion of the three urban encounters analysed here which consider the complex and multiple interactions between people as they occur in urban spaces and why these particular urban contexts are crucial to the relationships that they develop. Further, the encounters within this paper are also encounters between multiple urbans, in which Hong Kong, London, and the sites of recruiting universities are in direct conversation. Necessarily this means that the paper analyses a range of different contexts and directions present in student recruitment, showing that the imagination of elsewhere is just as important as the 'beingthereness' that has hitherto dominated conceptions of the urban encounter.

International Student Mobilities and the Urban Imaginary

This literature review considers three broad conceptualisations of international student mobilities. First, by way of background, it offers some insight into the international student decision-making process which is often couched within the rhetoric of the student consumer. It then offers reflections on the lived experience of students in urban spaces and their role in shaping them. Finally, it considers how urban branding strategies are adopted by universities as an attempt to recruit international students.

As noted in the introduction the drive to recruit international students and internationalise universities more widely was initially driven by neoliberal higher education policies adopted in the 1980s (Beech, 2019). While international students have historically been part of the higher education landscape, numbers grew exponentially from this point forwards (Madge et al., 2009). This has been matched by growing demand from students for international higher education opportunities brought about by a range of different, often interconnected factors. At times, it may arise simply from a lack of opportunity in their home countries (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Gribble, 2008). However, longer-term planning and their future career trajectories have also been cited as a key factor within their decision making. Raghuram (2013) noted, for instance, that student migrants are motivated by their desire to acquire knowledge in order to make themselves more desirable migrants and so study abroad is considered as a gateway to upskilling. Likewise, Brooks and Waters' (2011) work has recognised the importance of social and cultural capital accumulation in this process. They note that for international students it is as much the learning that they acquire when overseas as the connections they make, and the wider personal development that they experience that raises their employability profiles. This poses important questions for student choice, as it suggests that there are wider experiential elements that are important to international students as they decide where to study.

Whilst internationalisation agendas have been driven by neoliberal perspectives, it would be remiss to assume that international students themselves are exclusively neoliberal

beings. Literature reflecting this has often focused on the student experience when abroad. Reddy (2019) noted, for example, that students negotiate their identities when overseas through frameworks of love, care and affection for other students (c.f. Cheng, 2016). Likewise work relating to friendship formation when abroad is not always suggestive of students as having an exclusively neoliberal focus (Beech, 2019). There is other evidence as well that students are motivated by a desire for fun, or to prolong youthful adolescence before taking on the greater responsibilities of adulthood (Waters et al., 2011). Interestingly, universities appear to attempt to harness these energies through various ‘performances’ of care within the recruitment process (Beech 2021).

As Nofre et al’s (2017a) work shows, the urban is often framed as a space of excess and debauchery amongst international exchange student communities (Nofre et al., 2017a, 2017b; Malet Calvo et al., 2017). Given the close alignment universities have to particular places, it is unsurprising that prospective students also frame their educational choice around the role of place – and therefore the urban environment. Beech (2014) writes that international student choices are often brought about by an attraction to particular places fuelled by imaginative geographies of locations, but also of the educational experience. Likewise, Prazeres et al (2017) notes that the quality of life on offer in distinctive locations often overshadows academic factors within student decision making. That is to say, in a world where there is so much choice in terms of the higher education on offer, and so many purportedly excellent options, it was factors relating to lifestyle and experience that students used to prioritise where they eventually chose to study. This has ramifications for how the international student experience is portrayed to prospective students by universities.

Relatedly, recent work by Lee (2020) has analysed social media use and imagery of students overseas and revealed a “performed and curated cosmopolitanism” (p.10) – effectively sharing their urban experiences and influencing others to consider the same. When shared with friends and followers these images have the power to begin the process of founding powerful imaginative geographies of place and experience, particularly given that research shows how important social media can be in terms of creating expectations of travel overseas (Amaro et al., 2016; Narangajavana et al., 2017). Effectively, for students this will be the beginning of a growing awareness of the urban and ‘brand’ experience that cities and universities can offer them.

As the urban encounters detailed in this paper show, universities are keenly aware of the need to capitalise on these understandings. What is clear is that they feel a need to effectively ‘brand’ both the institutions themselves but also the urban environments in which they are based in order to appeal to prospective students. Whilst city branding is a focus of urban administrators, Vanolo (2018) writes that the practice is associated with multiple actors (such as universities), and that brands are essential to influencing daily life, enabling people to feel either in or out of place. Successful city branding can capture the essence of a locale and its reputation, going hand-in-hand with the commodification of place (Kearns & Lewis, 2019; Ye & Björner, 2018; Rabbiosi, 2015). The focus of urban and city branding is primarily on wealth generation, and to draw business away from competing urban centres (Cleave et al., 2017). From a university perspective branding their location, and the lifestyle on offer successfully, is likely to ensure future customer loyalties (Evans, 2003) – in this case from students. In contrast to this, poor or limited urban branding can lead to the fragmentation of a city’s image (Cleave et al., 2017), which could have negative connotations for international student prospects.

It is also worth reflecting that universities who either successfully cultivate these city brands and/or have a history of robust student recruitment are likely to reap longer term benefits as the students themselves become vehicles for change in the city, leading to the emergence of particular services catered to them (Collins, 2010). Malet Calvo (2018) has

offered interesting reflections on processes brought about by international students in Lisbon, Portugal. He postulates that:

international students seem to be particularly relevant in urban change because they participate in knowledge economy (as students), in travel economy (as strangers), and in leisure economy (as youth) from a socio-economic position that is above the average in their home countries (Malet Calvo, 2018 p.2144).

The multiple identities encapsulated by students at any one time can lead to significant impacts on the urban including living spaces, but also other spaces of consumption, like nightclubs and urban spaces of social protest (Malet Calvo, 2018; Malet Calvo et al., 2017; see also Nofre et al., 2017a). The transformation of urban spaces to cater to these students obviously serves to facilitate future mobilities and migrations, as do the chains of social and cultural capital between students which develop as a result (c.f. Beech, 2015; Collins, 2010).

In light of all of this, it should come as no surprise that universities and private agencies associated with international student recruitment also attempt to brand city destinations and particular universities as one and the same in order to attract prospective students. However, despite their importance these processes have yet to be analysed. This paper uses three encounters between overseas universities in Hong Kong and relationship building with prospective students to demonstrate how these processes are intimately entwined with the urban.

Methodology

This paper employs a mixed qualitative methodology using observations at a series of international student recruitment events held in Hong Kong (July 2017) together with interviews with international student recruitment staff employed at a range of English and Scottish universities (2014-15). These included five international student recruitment fairs and an international student pre-departure event in Hong Kong during July 2017. Hong Kong was chosen because the cultural focus on educational meritocracy comes into conflict with limited domestic higher education opportunities locally (only 18% of students are able to access tertiary education opportunities in Hong Kong straight from school) and this creates ideal market conditions for international student recruitment (Waters & Leung, 2017b, 2017a) and therefore for the urban encounters detailed in this paper. The fairs were arranged by a variety of different bodies – including both international student recruitment agencies, as well as other umbrella organisations (such as the British Council). They ranged from the large scale, with close to 100 exhibitors, to rather more boutique events which may have had less than twenty.

Attending the fairs was an opportunity to see first-hand how study experiences are presented to students, and to document the methods and languages used by agents, universities and other bodies to encourage enrolment. This timeframe in July is a critical juncture in the international student recruitment calendar as it is at this point that students receive their Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education and offers made by universities are accepted. However, as the research detailed below shows, it is also a period of heightened tension, as these decisions are finalised. Detailed field-notes were taken at each of the events when possible, or immediately afterwards, before being transcribed and analysed. The choice of the events attended was primarily opportunistic and either on the basis of prior consent from organisers or consent obtained on the day. The pre-departure event was attended on an invitation from the organisers.

With regards to the interviews, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff based at a range of universities in England and Scotland. Again, the sampling strategy here was opportunistic, necessarily so at what are fluid events. An email was sent out on a forum for professionals working in international student recruitment in 2014 to which 20 interested participants responded, however, due to time constraints, only 10 decided to take up the offer of a semi-structured interview. The only pre-requisite was that participants had to be working or very recently employed in international higher education recruitment in the UK at the time.

To maintain their anonymity all interviewees have been attributed pseudonyms and the universities at which they worked at the time have not been named. The interviews were conducted via video-conferencing or telephone between August 2014 and June 2015, lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. Using this more flexible method of interviewing was essential because of the geographic distribution of the participants, and it also enabled greater scope to vary the scheduling of the interviews if their availability changed, whilst retaining many of the benefits of a more traditional face-to-face format (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Many of the participants noted that they used video-conferencing when speaking to prospective overseas students and so they were comfortable with the arrangement.

Whilst the sample size is relatively small, the participants offered strong insights into the state of international higher education recruitment in the UK for a number of reasons. First, the reforms to the UK higher education system over the last 30 years, which have moved towards a more competitive and marketized structure (Alexander et al 2018; Naidoo, 2016; Beech, 2019), have left a sector which is highly differentiated. The interviewees reflected this, coming from a range of universities which could be considered representative of this diversity including both Russell Group¹, Post-1992 universities², new universities³ and specialist HEIs, as well as those with significant international student numbers and those which had small international student communities. Further, five of the participants had over ten years' experience of working in international student recruitment or admissions more generally, and several had worked either at multiple universities or in private sector student recruitment. Together this painted comprehensive picture of the state of international student recruitment at the time and offering reflections on changing policy and its impact. Combining observations with the information gathered from the interviews created an opportunity to assess policy and recruitment practices together with experiential insights into international student recruitment practice. Like the observations, the interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed manually.

Three Urban Encounters

The following three sections detail findings from each of the urban encounters using data from the observations and the interviews. The first explores the international student recruitment fair and the importance of the urban and the place-based interactions this produces. In particular it examines the role of the urban branding in the communication of prestige to prospective students. The second looks at the connections between London and

¹ A self-styled collective of 24 research intensive universities in the UK, who often brand themselves as offering educational prestige.

² Formed following the removal of the binary divide between the UK's universities and polytechnic colleges in 1992, this enabled the latter to apply for university status provided 55 per cent or more of their students were enrolled in higher education programmes (Stevenson & Bell, 2009).

³ Formed after the removal of the binary divide in the UK, but not former polytechnic colleges.

other UK universities and how these are often framed in terms of time, as well as drawing on the excitement associated with the urban and the world city. The third, considers how the pre-departure event was used to demonstrate an urban playscape to prospective students by inhabiting Hong Kong's own streetscape and creating imaginative geographies of the experience that awaited students in the UK.

The International Student Recruitment Fair

Of the ten interviewees, seven stated that higher education fairs were a critical element of their universities' recruitment practices enabling them to connect with and establish relationships with students, as well as offering provisional university places. Lois worked at a redbrick university and was responsible for student recruitment from North and Central America. At the time of her interview, just under 27% of their students were from overseas. She noted that fairs were a key element of their practice, and, together with a range of other methods (such as school visits), enabled the university to build a rapport with prospective students:

Lois: ...we participate in large British Council fairs and other sponsored fairs and we work closely with agents. So it's really trying to establish a presence – we do school visits as well, we do go into local high schools and try to establish relationships with the high school councillors so that if we go back to the same area each year, we've built that rapport and we could be invited back or we could go back and do a presentation to students, so it is a combination of fairs and personal visits to universities, doing university fairs, working with agents, social media marketing...

In the same respect Simon, based at a Russell Group university, noted that fairs were also part of their recruitment arsenal. He said that they “attend fairs overseas...like most institutions would” and discussed these in the wider context of building rapport – like Lois – such as school visits. Fairs were therefore an opportunity to inhabit urban spaces and bring the university to prospective students, in conjunction with other practices. Interestingly, this reflects observations from Schuldt and Bathelt (2011) which note that even in a virtual and computer mediated age, face-to-face networking and interaction are essential when making key business decisions and forming relationships. The international higher education fair could then be considered as a critical step within student decision-making.

Three of the five fairs attended were organised and run by education agencies (an attempt to gain access to a fourth fair proved unsuccessful – a reminder that this was a private business enterprise) (for insight into how such agencies operate see Beech, 2018; Collins, 2012; Huang et al., 2016). Of the further two, one was organised by the British Council, and the other – the Hong Kong International Education Expo – by a company which specialised in the organisation of trade fairs and their associated activities. This latter event, and some of those hosted by the agencies, offered a range of opportunities for prospective students which included tertiary education, but also language schools, study tours, elite boarding schools and wider access to education consultants and agents – who in themselves could obviously facilitate many of these opportunities (Beech, 2018a). This demonstrates that the desire for an international education applied across all levels of schooling.

The communication of prestige was evident throughout the events and in multiple different ways. This ranged from companies offering “Wall Street English”, or opportunities to tour “dream universities”, through to another whose advertising showed a pathway through schooling, elite international education and onto a successful career, all facilitated by their

language school. Likewise, a seminar at the International Education Expo, hosted by an admissions director for a sixth form college in the UK, used it as a platform to show how their students go on to enrol at elite higher education institutions such as LSE and the University of Cambridge in the UK, and at the University of Hong Kong. Central to all of this was the creation of a geographic imaginary surrounding international higher education and its alignment to elite opportunities. As the second encounter featured in this paper goes on to show, these geographic imaginaries are central to selling the idea of the international student experience in the UK.

The locations of these fairs and the types of urban spaces they inhabited also acted to convey that these were elite events. As well as conference and convention centres they were also hosted in hotels which were four- or five-star venues. Of course, this is in part a function of availability and accessibility of such spaces, but also reflects an attempt to develop the impression of professionalism, mobility and modernity, these elite spaces thus acting as a proxy for an elite university experience. Given that international students tend to be elites, both economically and in terms of their social and cultural capital (c.f. Brooks & Waters, 2011), this came as little surprise. Venue choice was critical to selling the dream of an elite, overseas experience in the UK or elsewhere, and of creating a sense of prestige and desirability around an overseas education. The urban encounters facilitated by these spaces – both in terms of how the urban enables meetings between individuals, and how individuals meet with and interact with urban spaces (for more on which see the third encounter below) – are essential to these prospective students future mobilities. This echoes findings of work on the practices at other similar events which are designed to promote elite mobilities, such as that of Cranston (2014) on the Expat Show. Likewise, these were spaces which were designed to showcase mobility opportunities, foster introductions and build rapport between interested parties and employers.

Whilst, for many universities, fairs are a common practice, it is worth noting absences as well. Fieldnotes from Hong Kong reveal that Oxbridge universities did not attend for instance, although other Russell Group institutions were a considerable presence alongside other pre- and post-1992 institutions. This reflects findings by Beech (2019) which suggest that whilst Oxbridge holds significant prestige and lay knowledge amongst the wider student community, negating any need for advertising, other indicators of esteem – such as Russell Group membership – carry less weight. There is also an important iconography at play in terms of presence and absence. Institutions present tended to be from larger cities, the ‘sell’ distinctly of an urban modernity as opposed to a more heritage-driven or rural imagining of the UK. Such absences may also delineate important distinctions between ‘recruiting’ and ‘selecting’ institutions. Irrespective of this, student recruitment fairs were clearly a critical recruitment method for many institutions and an urban international student recruitment phenomenon, happening in and dependent on urban spaces, the absence of which could have significant ramifications for some universities in this era in which the ‘logics’ neoliberalism ever more firmly hold and are actively embraced by universities.

The fair therefore represents a complex urban encounter. It is a literal coming together of peoples and cultures, but also of texts and sounds, of different urbans (Hong Kong, London, other UK cities), claims and performances and an assault on the senses. In this, the ‘being there’ element of the encounter is important and carefully staged by the organisers and recruiters but so too is the attempt to encounter places that are not ‘there’ but instead represented, told, performed and imagined. These were encounters not just in and of the urban but also between urbans. This tension between there and not there in the encounter is explored further in the following two cases.

The London Effect: Time as a Proxy for Distance

Recent work has shown that international students have complex imaginative geographies which play an important role in their decision-making processes (Beech, 2014; Prazeres et al., 2017). London, as a major world city, is a key strategic focus for international students, however, the issue is complicated by evidence that they use their imaginative geographies of the city as a proxy for their likely experiences of studying in the UK more widely. The UK's urban geographies instead become flattened, with the expectation that any experiences that students have here will be closely aligned to the 'London Experience'; effectively the capital and the UK as a whole, become one and the same. This clearly can create conflict with the realities of overseas study (cf. Beech, 2014) and was reflected in the insights of staff working in the city and beyond it. Joel, who worked at a Russell Group institution in London was clear regarding the geographical pull that it has:

For many students...they want to be in London, many international students, many students don't know beyond London so that's their kind of focus. Many students equally will have relatives or friends or you know maybe even former high level businessmen or politicians who have come here. So I think that's quite an attraction. The city itself it ... it's a great benefit that's a good selling point.

Likewise, Rhoda, who was based at a post-1992 institution in the city also alluded to the city's diverse population as being a draw for students due to their pre-existing networks and familiarities with London:

...by the very nature of being in London we tend to be more diverse as an institution than perhaps those that are, you know, in the north of England or the Midlands where they have more concentrated recruitment...therefore the students coming already have friends, family and so that extended referral network is more diverse from London than it is perhaps from other cities.

Meanwhile staff at other institutions would reflect on their geographical distance and distinction from London. Judith, who worked at a post-1992 university in Scotland reflected on various challenges that this brought:

The challenge is getting that audience because the noise of...London...the next barrier is traditional universities. So, in Scotland we're lucky...you've got Glasgow, Edinburgh and St Andrews...so well you're in [this city], you're not in London, you're not an ancient university and then you've got our rankings – we're not a well ranked university because we are not a research university...

Each of these commentaries investigate the ways in which students build familiarities and connections with the city. Wilson (2016) writes that these are also valid ways in which the city is encountered. In particular she notes there is a need to move beyond thinking of "the city as a space within which contact occurs" (p.215) towards recognising that our second- and third-hand encounters (e.g. artistic representations, documentaries, or in this case social networks) shape our geographical and cultural imaginations, and provide a blue-print for future engagements and encounters with these locations.

It is therefore unsurprising that London featured prominently at the international recruitment fairs when marketing the higher education on offer. This continued to be the case even if the geographical distance between the university and London was relatively far by

UK standards. Posters and ‘pop-up’ banners for universities which were not in the city, or which did not make specific reference to London in their name, made connections to it with frequency. The University of Surrey, located in Guildford, for instance, was “34 minutes to London by Rail”, the University Sussex, just north of Brighton, was “9 minutes to Brighton, 60 minutes to London” and the University of Portsmouth was “90 minutes from London” to name but a few.

Interestingly, even for universities which were geographically more remote these claims were still important – a banner for Queen’s University Belfast showed a map of the UK with Belfast to London airlinks and reading “one hour from London”. Glasgow Strathclyde did likewise using a map to show its own airlinks with the city. Others made connections not only to London but to other major cities as well – highlighting the importance of greater connectivity and perhaps even that this was an expectation for students. The University of York, for example, showed rail travel times to London, but also to Manchester, Leeds and Edinburgh, with the University of Keele choosing a similar tactic. Brunel University had “easy access to London” and it was only “15 minutes from Heathrow Airport” effectively taking this further and suggesting its interconnectedness with the rest of the world.

It is not surprising that universities recognise the popularity of, and familiarity with, London, but the focus on drawing explicit connections between different universities and the city was more so. There are a number of conclusions which can be drawn from this. First, in a sense space was collapsed into time, but there is also an interesting topology at play here. By reducing the world into a series of cities told relationally – Hong Kong, London, wherever the recruiting university was actually located – in terms of the technologies and times of connection (how long to the airport, how long to London by rail) the prospective student is asked to imagine a flattened world in which the experience of being in and moving through world cities is all that matters. But, in a sense, the urban here also converges into a oneness; a oneness in the UK in terms of all being understood through London but also a oneness internationally in that it is framed and shaped by the encounter in Hong Kong.

Second, and relatedly, that international students are attracted to the excitement of an urban experience in which their own experiences (here, of being in Hong Kong) and their imaginings of the UK as filtered and framed through London shapes what being an international student might be like (c.f. Beech, 2014, 2019). There were also indications that this was sometimes triangulated with parental expectations of their time abroad. David, had been spent 11 years working in international student recruitment at the time of his interview in 2014, this was both in the private sector and for other universities. Reflecting on his role working for a large private sector recruiter he discussed the attraction of students, and their parents, to particular universities but for differing reasons, in this case the University of Surrey:

David: Surrey is an interesting one because it’s an excellent university ...a lot of international students they want to be in London or near London but a lot of parents don’t want their little children to be in London...maybe it’s to do with safety, maybe it’s to do with distractions, or maybe it’s to do with costs, but somewhere like Surrey it’s quite popular with international students because it meets both the parents and the students’ needs because it is actually possible to get from Surrey, from Guildford into London for the evening and get back if you really wanted to and certainly to go there for the weekend. So, the students have that kind of access and feeling close to London, whereas the parents have reassurance that it’s not in London...

In the case of Surrey it is possible to see how one location is sold in multiple different ways depending on the audience. To parents this may be related to cost, safety, or the opportunity to focus on academic life, for students Guildford is offered up as close to London. It might be understood, for students, as London but not London: the nature of the non-London place (in this instance Guildford) airbrushed as an irrelevance beyond its proximity to the city and it's not being London.

Third, however, is the importance of time in measuring distance and how these two become conflated. We know that with greater technological advancement time and space have become compressed, and geographical distance matters relatively less (Urry, 2007). This has facilitated travel opportunities and therefore, in part, the ability to be an overseas student. However, there are other issues at work here, and it is clear that time is especially important in this context. From a marketing perspective it is almost as if distance, and therefore geography, is irrelevant, only that time across a vacuous, Euclidean idea of 'space' matters. Rarely did maps feature in advertising, likewise any indication of distance was absent, rather the focus was on how long it would take to reach London. This chimes with Marcu's (2017) reflections of mobility as taking place within distinct moments of time.

However, whilst time and space have become compressed – and were also sold as being *conflated* – it is also apparent that connexity and access to modes of transport and communications are very much dependent on social status. Morley (2011) recognises that this is particularly the case with regards to speed, which becomes an indicator of wealth; the fastest and most efficient modes of transportation being open only to those who can afford them only. Likewise, wasting time, and being static or stuck in time, is considered an undesirable state. Both Andersson (2014) and Griffiths (2014) have reflected on how ideas of waiting, slowness and uncertainty are reserved for the less desirable (such as illegal immigrants or asylum seekers). These groups may be effectively suspended in time as they await decisions on their mobility from higher powers. More generally as well, slowness and delays are a frequent complaint of travellers, who have an expectation of speed and efficiency, something which is often not the experience within the immigration system (Griffiths, 2014). Consider then our high-status, highly-desirable, mobile students – at these recruitment events there is no wasting of time and no slowness, instead there is efficiency and rapid decision-making. International office staff have the power to make (often provisional) offers then and there. There is scope to meet with the staff who will work with you, as a prospective student, to facilitate your mobility. In short, this encounter is suggestive of an elite experience. On this note we move onto our third encounter – which considers how universities attempt to harness international student enthusiasms for the UK.

Catching the Tram to Coventry

The final urban encounter reflects on a predeparture event hosted by Coventry University in Hong Kong in July 2017 on one of three, university-branded trams traversing the city at the time. This was an opportunity for incoming students for the academic year 2017-2018 to meet with the international office and some academic staff. Ostensibly this was an evening for the students to have any questions answered, and the fieldnotes from the event suggest it was relaxed and unpressurised. This was an attempt to create an urban atmosphere which was distinct to that of other recruitment events and aimed at being safe, fun, caring and engaged (Gandy, 2017; Löfgren, 2014). At the same time, it was also an event which aimed to ensure student loyalties. This was important given that this was a time when they may have been considering alternative opportunities, and there was significant activity in the city regarding international student recruitment. The predeparture event had three important roles: to showcase the University through the theatre of the urban; to sew seeds of various imaginative

geographies surrounding the University; and finally, to demonstrate the University's empathy and caring.

This final encounter offers an interesting juxtaposition from the previous. Whilst the second encounter attempted to draw attention to university city's in relation to London – and to capitalise on the creative and cultural capital it represents. The tram offered interesting insights into the University's desire to be viewed as a dynamic brand, on the move through the city. Instead, the predeparture event on the tram was a way of communicating the uniqueness that it could offer in its own right in an attempt to ensure student loyalties. Hollands and Chatterton (2003) wrote that branding is key to creating product loyalty, but, further to this, has a significant role in creating consumer identities and social status. From the perspective of any university it is, therefore, critical that these loyalties are instilled within students early in the recruitment process, so that students feel unable to consider alternative options. In this case, the University uses the theatre of the urban (Astor, 2019; Hollands & Chatterton, 2003) to showcase itself as dynamic and exciting. The tram is both moving through and simultaneously of the urban space, and its existence within this location enables the Coventry University to adopt some of these same characteristics as well.

Reflecting on the imaginative geographies that the tram offers up to prospective students it is worth keeping two things in mind – first, the cultural capital that prospective students are likely to associate with Coventry, but second, the specific understandings they may have about the University, its offering and its own urban environment. This progresses work by Wilson (2016) which suggests urban encounters can come from afar, at a distance, as the tram's situation within Hong Kong's streets and the atmosphere that they created was perhaps also intended to inform the students' imaginative geographies of Coventry University or its student experience. Research demonstrates the importance of imaginative geographies around international student choice (Beech, 2014; Prazeres et al., 2017; Collins, 2014). This refers to their preconceptions of particular places, often reflecting greater power relationships – consider, for example, the postcolonial nature of many flows of international students. Furthermore irrespective of their representativeness these imaginative geographies can be powerful in and of themselves, Said (1985) wrote, that knowledge which makes claims to be about something actual can be difficult to dismiss “expertise is attributed to it...[creating] not only knowledge but the very reality they appear to describe” (p.94). The tram serves to create an imaginative geography of Coventry both to the prospective students – a caring and welfare-led university, but also to bystanders – here is a place which is dynamic and exciting. Harnessing these imaginative geographies develops key discourses of desirability around migration which can play an important role in migrant choices (Collins, 2018).

This leads onto the final element of the tram experience, which demonstrated the University as a caring, empathetic entity. At this point it is worth recognising that the tram offered a very different urban encounter, this was an intimate experience in contrast to the almost overwhelming busy-ness of some of the recruitment fairs (see Cranston (2014) for some reflections on the atmosphere at similar events). Valentine (2008) writes that particular spaces produce or facilitate positive encounters, and so the outcome of the encounter is influenced by the urban environment (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014). While Askins (2016) showed encounters and shared activities can build successful connections. The tram event was therefore an attempt to build and facilitate positive relationships with the university staff and, by association, the university.

The need to build relationships with prospective students quickly was critical to successful enrolments. Lois, who was cited previously, also discussed in her interview about the ways in which she made these important connections with students. She noted that she always made sure to follow up enquiries from students quickly, and in person, with bespoke

or at the very least personalised emails. She also reflected on the usefulness of telephone conversations:

Lois: [students] actually prefer having that telephone conversation whether that's because it's easier than typing out all their questions or they just like to hear that there is someone on the other end and I think that in some respects they really like to hear that there is someone else from the US who has experienced what they are experiencing in some way. So I've found the telephone conversations have been really helpful. And that especially works well, not even just through the application process but also in the decision-making process.

Speaking to students directly seemed to lead to greater critical buy-in at key times in the application and decision-making process. It was also an ideal opportunity to share or offer similarities with and to students. Lois used her citizenship and background to identify directly with the students she was recruiting. She too had been an international student and felt that this offered important currency when she was trying to gain their commitment.

Other recruitment staff noted building a perception of care and empathy within their recruitment policies. Sarah, who worked at a specialist university, noted that building trust was important as it “[gave] them the impression they are going to have a really excellent experience” at her university. Furthermore, she noted how her university used the London Universities International Partnership (LUIP) – a consortium of smaller London universities which was active at the time – as part of their recruitment process, suggesting a collaborative and caring university alliance in the city. Speaking of the platform she said:

Sarah: there is definitely a positive message that goes along with us all collaborating because it shows that we are kind of working together rather than just vying for the students' buck you know? So when we go out as a group and we are working together to recruit students we have a clear mission and people see us standing altogether working together and they see us rather than just coming over to get students income as a group of people trying to pick quality students to educate.

However, she followed this up by reflecting on the veracity of this stating that “that might not necessarily be true but that's the impression that I think we give which I think is very powerful”. Reddy (2019) cautions against us focusing on the international student as economically focused, and rightly so, but it is difficult to ignore that international higher education recruitment is a highly marketized migration industry. Care and the performance of care and empathy, are a central element of this.

Conclusion

This paper brought together literature on the urban encounter together with international student mobilities to determine its role in their recruitment. This aspect of their mobilities had been hitherto under-theorised. Yet research has shown that the urban was important to students in other ways. Beech (2014) and Prazeres et al (2017) have both reflected on how the urban can be a key attraction for students during their decision-making. Consequently this paper used the framework of the encounter (Massey, 2005; Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014) to demonstrate the importance of the urban in facilitating connections between universities and prospective students. As per Wilson and Darling's (2016) findings

the three encounters investigated in this paper were often associated with difference, intervention, could be momentary or fleeting, and each produce distinctive urban spaces.

By using three distinctive encounters this paper shows how universities rely on the ‘throwntogetherness’ (after Massey (2005)) of people (such as staff and agents), images and representations (such as the languages used to convey a sense of place), and experiences of the university when overseas (such as the tram event). In so doing universities and events conveyed the elite experience of an international education in terms of how they were emplaced within their host cities through various markers of prestige (such as the use of elite hotels as venues). Second, universities draw on their connections to London in order to sell an experience which builds on their geographical and cultural imaginations of what the city can offer. Many universities made connections with the city even if they were geographically distant from it, building on students’ pre-existing cultural and geographical imaginations of London, using this as an anchor to attract students.

Third, the tram event was also an enactment of university life, as the university attempted to build critical relationships with incoming students by demonstrating a caring and fun-loving ‘personality’. Each of these encounters are reflective of Wilson’s (2016) thesis that the urban encounter can also happen at a distance given that both of these moments relied upon the geographic imagination to build an understanding of a place or experience.

To conclude, this paper provides important contributions regarding how the urban encounter makes possible international student mobility. Whilst international student mobilities have become a critical focus of migration research, this aspect of their experience has been hitherto under-researched. Given the paucity of work there are areas which could be researched further. The student voice is absent here and there remains scope to hear their reflections on these urban encounters, as well as on their recruitment experiences more widely. Second, the landscape of recruitment has, necessarily, changed radically since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. This in no way detracts from the importance of understanding the dynamics of the urban encounters investigated here. However, it does open new avenues of research in terms of understanding how this has changed recruitment processes in the short and long-term.

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