Peripheries within the higher education centres
Internationalisation experiences in Finland and UK

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ABSTRACT
To investigate how the process of peripheralisation usurps internationalisation experiences within the global higher education centres, this article draws on two separate case studies, one conducted in Finland and the other in the UK. In both contexts, Anglophone hegemony plays an important role, but in different manners. In the Finnish case, conflating internationalisation with Englishisation results in both domestic and international students and staff having to continuously grapple with language use in their daily lives. In the UK context, international students in English-speaking universities encounter asymmetric power relations with the locals, which they try to overcome through identity negotiation over digital and physical spaces. Both cases show that creating a liveable international university necessitates structural changes that would build on already existing agentic engagements of international students and staff.

KEYWORDS
Anglophone asymmetry, digital space, identity negotiation, internationalisation, liveable university, peripheralisation

While the three cases in the previous article elucidated peripheries in the Global South, analysing three countries’ top-down efforts to regain their own agencies in contemporary global higher education institutions, this article focuses on the experiences of peripheralisation in centres of higher education systems. Sonja Trifuljesko investigates ethnographically the tensions derived from Anglophone hegemony in a Finnish university, and On Hee Choi explores the clash between academic and social practices and international students’ aspirations and cultural differences in a UK university.
Both highlight how peripheralisation may happen within territories that are otherwise considered as central. Furthermore, the authors point out the significant but nonetheless limited role of agency in making the internationalisation process a more balanced one.

In an interconnected world of globalisation, people's movement and information flows contribute not only to producing a new globalised locality but also to reshaping the concept of 'centre' and 'periphery' (Appadurai 1996: 32). As receiving a degree from an English-medium higher education institution has been perceived as an essential condition for future success, English-speaking countries have gained prominence among international students. Hence, a growing number of individuals from non-Western countries pursue their studies in Anglophone institutions in the Global North with the belief that higher education in the West is more cosmopolitan and superior to local education (Igarashi and Saito 2014: 7). At the same time, non-Anglophone countries in the West try to adjust to this trend by providing more English-medium programmes. Globalisation has, thus, only accelerated already existing inequalities and disparities in higher education by reinforcing unbalanced relations between different parts of the world (Altbach 2004: 8). Both case studies in this article deal with the difficulties and challenges that various actors with marginalised and peripheral voices encounter at universities situated in the geographical and economic centres.

Finland, in Sonja Trifuljesko’s study, is a context from which the multifaceted aspects of internationalisation can be observed, in particular by focusing on the relation between language politics and internationalisation of higher education. To be counted as global higher education centres, Finnish universities must adapt to Anglophone-centred internationalisation and a knowledge economy. This creates tensions within the daily life of the university, where both domestic and international students and staff must continuously grapple with language use. Trifuljesko shows how they deal with language troubles of ‘Englishisation’ and draws some lessons for making internationalisation of higher education a more balanced process.

A second case study by On Hee Choi highlights the peripheral positionality of international students at a UK university and a possibility to overcome marginality through activating agency over digital spaces. International students are characterised as part of a generation of ‘transnational mobility’ and globalisation (Turner and Robson 2008: 54). International students have become more mobile beyond geographical boundaries of nations and states due to technology development and desire for educational qualifications.
as a form of ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1987). Internationalised higher education institutions are expected to lead international and local students in cultivating shared values, which enable students to embrace the ‘other’ (Hannerz 1990: 239–240), including people, cultures, and languages. Both the curricula of universities and social media appear to underscore ‘democratic values such as equality and diversity’ (Robson 2011: 620) and exercise inclusive principles based on respect to people’s cultural diversity and different learning experiences. However, such ideas have not applied fully to everyday lives in reality. In this vein, international students stakeholders of internationalised higher education need to reposition themselves as agents and make their peripheral voices heard (Choi 2020).

This article is structured in the following way: In the first part, Sonja Trifuljesko presents her study, which is followed by the study by On Hee Choi. The two studies are again brought together in the conclusion, which aims to provide a few pointers for overcoming current asymmetries in the process of internationalisation.

Case study A. The language politics of internationalisation: A perspective from Finland

My ethnographic research, conducted between 2014 and 2016 at the University of Helsinki, brings attention to the role that language practices in general, and the hegemonic status of the English language in particular (Díaz 2018; Haberland 2009), play in creating higher education peripheries. The Finnish case is especially conducive for investigating the significance of language practices within the process of internationalisation. On the one hand, the supreme position of the two national languages (Finnish and Swedish) has been legally guaranteed both within and outside universities (Suomen Perustuslaki 1999; Yliopistolaki 2009), and the overall dominance of the Finnish language, with 87.3 per cent of the population being Finnish speakers (Official Statistics of Finland 2019), is unquestionable. On the other hand, English has generally a strong presence in Finland (Leppänen et al. 2009) and the Finnish higher education sector is, in fact, known for taking the process of ‘Englishisation’ (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1999) to a somewhat extreme degree (Alexander 2008).

Hartmut Haberland and Janus Mortensen warn that it is important not to overestimate the general significance of English since this language ‘is not spoken in every corner of the world’ (2012: 1, their emphasis). While
agreeing with their claim, I argue that the role of English in the process of internationalisation of higher education cannot be underestimated either, since contemporary internationalisation policies and practices are premised on the hegemonic position of the English language. Rebecca Hughes (2008) pointed out how ‘Anglophone asymmetry’, that is a disproportionate appeal towards English-speaking contexts, plays an important role in student mobility, and this is clearly observed in On Hee Choi’s study, presented later in the article. Moreover, not any kind of English matters, but rather its Anglo-American standard variant. This leads to a further stratification between different parts of the Anglophone world, as Taina Saarinen and Tarja Nikula (2013: 99–101) have shown.

In this case study, I investigate how ‘Englishisation’ affects everyday life at a Finnish university. To do so, I pay attention to the language ideologies, that is ‘cultural conceptions of the nature, form and purpose of language, and of communicative behaviour as an enactment of a collective order’ (Gal and Woolard 1995: 130). I argue that the Anglophone hegemony within the process of internationalisation plays an important role in (re)producing peripheries even among actors that are otherwise situated at the contemporary centres of global higher education.

Arja Haapakorpi and Taina Saarinen underscore that modern ‘universities are as much results of their organisational nationalism as their disciplinary internationalism’ (2014: 190). This means that the issue of which language is being used as a medium of communication has always been important. Nonetheless, in recent decades, due to increasing international mobility, the significance of language practices in university daily life has grown (Haapakorpi and Saarinen 2014: 194). I start by providing a brief overview of developments at Finnish universities from the perspective of language use and then draw on my fieldwork at the University of Helsinki to point out some of the discrepancies that the taken-for-granted status of English in the process of internationalisation has generated.

**Language politics at Finnish universities**

Taina Saarinen (2012a) divides the history of Finnish higher education in terms of language into five periods. Its first two hundred years (c. 1640–1850), which constituted the latter part of the Swedish centuries-long rule of the Finnish territories and the beginning of the Russian one, were characterised by the dominance of Latin. The second half of the nineteenth
century saw the appearance of Swedish – the language of the majority of educated elite – and, gradually, Finnish – the language of the commoners – as the languages of tuition. Latin, on the other hand, continued to be the language of internationalisation until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was replaced by German.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the Finnish language took over as the dominant language of tuition, although Swedish was also retained. German, on the other hand, remained the dominant international language. After the Second World War, English slowly replaced German as the language of internationalisation. It was, however, only towards the end of the second millennium that English became the language of tuition, steadily squeezing out all other foreign languages (Saarinen 2012a).

The increase in language awareness in Finnish higher education coincided with the national awakening in the mid-nineteenth century, while Finland was still a part of the Russian Empire (Saarinen 2012a: 241). The Finnish language has played a crucial role in the construction of ‘Finnishness’, which is a common feature associated with the rise of nationalism (Engman 1995: 185; cf. Anderson 1983). The rise of Finnish consciousness was intimately intertwined with the Imperial Alexander University (the former name of the University of Helsinki), which attracted many of the key figures of the nationalist movement in Finland (Välimaa 2001). The importance of the Finnish language only strengthened in the first decades of the twentieth century, following Finland’s proclamation of independence in 1917. Language practices rose to prominence for the second time in the history of Finnish higher education with the foundation of new universities aiming to promote (primarily) Finnish and (to a lesser degree) Swedish as the language of tuition and with discussions about the relationship between the two languages at the University of Helsinki (Saarinen 2012a: 241–242). Recent discussions about the position of English within the context of Finnish higher education made language become visible again (Saarinen 2014: 142).

The salience of the English language in the Finnish university context coincided with the process of internationalisation of higher education that started in the late 1980s. While this process was initially focused on research, already during the 1990s and especially in the 2000s, it shifted towards developing foreign language study programmes (Nokkala 2007: 26–30). The expansion of these has been extraordinary with a high proportion of programmes now taught in English, making Finland one of the leading countries in Europe (Saarinen 2012b). This led to the rise in
numbers of foreign students, although these are still modest in comparison to the most popular Anglophone countries. In 2019, for instance, Finland welcomed 23,800 international students, which translated into eight per cent of the student body in the whole country (OECD 2021).

The discourse about English language being central to the competitiveness of national higher education systems and the constitution of ‘world’s best universities’ (Trifuljesko 2019) has made Saarinen (2014: 142) claim that ‘language may have been detached from nation’ in Finland, as the turn to English seemingly supports rather than challenges the nationalist agenda. While the debate about language politics seems to be omitted from the Finnish internationalisation policies (Saarinen 2012b), issues pertaining to language use are powerfully present and highly contested in the daily life of the university. In order to demonstrate this, I turn now to my ethnographic material.

Language troubles

On 7 April 2014, a group of approximately thirty doctoral candidate activists at the University of Helsinki got together to discuss their overall position. The main reason why doctoral candidates felt anxiety about their status was because yet another reconstruction of doctoral education was underway, attempting to make it more compatible with the ‘global knowledge economy’ principles (Trifuljesko 2021). The April forum of doctoral candidates was their second gathering of this kind – the first had been held in January 2014, just a few weeks after the new system of doctoral schools and programmes was introduced. The meeting was intended to be a conclusive one: a decision whether to form an association of postgraduate students at the University to safeguard their position was expected to be reached by the end of it.

I came to the meeting with three other female foreign students, all board members of an international student association at the University. I myself had unexpectedly joined this board three weeks earlier, when I attended its meeting as a part of my initial probing into fieldwork. The purpose of our presence at the doctoral candidates’ gathering was to ‘represent international student interests’. This, however, predominantly meant to remind other students – simply through our physical presence – that foreign doctoral candidates existed at the University as well and actually constituted 19 per cent of the PhD candidate body (Rector’s Office 2015). None of us had an intention of furthering any alternative political agenda at the meeting.
The venue was quite full. Chairs placed behind the tables in the central part of the room were almost completely occupied when we arrived, so we sat on a windowsill to the side. One of the organisers opened the meeting by explaining its purpose, and her initial words signalled that the meeting was to be held in Finnish. I knew that two of my companions would not be able to understand the proceedings fully due to language constraints. However, they did not make any objections. A glance between them indicated that they were disappointed but not surprised.

After a while, a Finnish-speaking doctoral candidate sitting in the middle of the room (hitherto unknown to any of us) suddenly interrupted the speaker by saying that there were several international students in the meeting and suggested that the meeting should therefore be held in English. Some individuals were nodding and murmuring in support, and some had a slightly disapproving facial expression. The language issue had also been raised at the January gathering of the PhD candidates, as well as in a smaller interim meeting.

The speaker stated that she had already left a comment in the University of Helsinki doctoral candidates’ Facebook group about the language issue. There she pointed out the historical relationship between the Finnish language and the university, previously described. The speaker then said that she did not want to waste any more time on this, and after a brief dispute with the doctoral candidate who had raised the issue, she continued her presentation in Finnish. The next speaker, however, decided to switch the language of his presentation to English, which remained the main language of the event, apart from the occasional interruptions in Finnish during the Q&A segment.

At first glance, the choice of language use in the event I have just described might appear to be a technicality. A few people at the meeting apparently faced a language barrier. The barrier was overcome simply by switching to another language, which everyone presumably understood. Nevertheless, precisely the assumption that both domestic and international doctoral candidates in Finland would be able to participate in the discussion in English – and only English – reveals that the decision to switch languages did more than simply resolve a technical issue. It reproduced English as the sole language of an international academic setting. Such a move automatically peripheralises all non-Anglophone higher education institutions within the process of internationalisation, placing a demand on them to adjust. The adjustment itself involves a dismissal of pre-existing
social relationships, which inevitably causes a disturbance (Tsing 2012, 2015a). Reinforcing communication in any language other than English within an international academic setting, however, leads only to further peripheralisation of a non-Anglophone institution. As such, it is difficult to uphold. Thus, once the whole issue in the PhD forum was framed in terms of the presence of international doctoral candidates at the meeting, the switch to English was inevitable.

Another indication that the current understanding of internationalisation involves conflation with the process of Englishisation lies in the proposal to switch the languages in the first place. Having spotted a few foreigners in the meeting, one of the doctoral candidates assumed – and for good reason – that they would not be able to participate in the discussion in Finnish. This happened because developing Finnish (or Swedish) language proficiency is not part of the internationalisation agenda at the University of Helsinki, as international students and staff are anyway understood as temporary within the global knowledge economy framework (Trifuljesko 2021). Thus, learning Finnish is understood as a matter of an individual acquiring a new skill rather than building a long-term social ties¹ (cf. Gershon 2011). And since the benefits of learning a language spoken only by about five million people gets easily overshadowed by the benefits of mastering a specific theory or methodology, many international students and researchers end up having poor Finnish skills.

At the same time, even though overall proficiency in English is very high in the country, the supremacy of Finnish is unquestionable. It is rare to use another language (be it Finland’s second national language, Swedish; some of the Finnish minority languages, such as Sámi; or any of the foreign languages) for any important public debate, either outside or inside the university. This is why my companions were not particularly surprised when the language of the vital PhD student meeting turned out to be Finnish. Moreover, the Finnish language has a strong presence in the everyday lives of foreigners at the University of Helsinki, being one of the main sources of their disengagement (Trifuljesko 2021). Advancing Finnish higher education’s move towards the centre through Anglophone-oriented internationalisation, therefore, puts international staff and students in a peripheral position, as their structurally conditioned weak Finnish skills prevent them from participating fully in university life. Their participation, namely, becomes contingent on the domestic students’ and staff’s decision on whether to use the English language within a certain context or not and
is often accompanied by a certain amount of resentment, either from the Finnish or non-Finnish speakers.

Beyond Anglophone hegemony in a more symmetrical process of internationalisation

The Anglophone hegemony affects centre-periphery dynamics within the process of internationalisation in peculiar ways. In the most obvious manner, ‘Englishisation’ promotes an asymmetry between Anglophone (moreover, Anglo-American) universities and universities in other parts of the world, even if the latter might otherwise appear to belong to the centres of global higher education, as it is the case with the University of Helsinki. Furthermore, ‘Englishisation’ pushes for a peripheralisation of historical ties pertaining to language, which are, nonetheless, pertinent to the existence of the non-Anglophone higher education institutions.

At the same time, the Anglophone hegemony within the process of internationalisation contributes towards the peripheralisation of foreign students and staff within a non-Anglophone institution. Namely, within the global knowledge economy policy frameworks, there is little institutional support for foreigners’ learning of the local language(s) as part of the process of building long-term social relations. While changing language to English within non-Anglophone institutions opens pathways for foreigners’ short-term participation in the university life, it also prevents their long-term incorporation in the university community. Within a non-Anglophone context, thus, the use of English language becomes paradoxically a tool for both inclusion and exclusion.

The Finnish case is particularly indicative for studying the effects of Englishisation, since language politics have played such a prominent role in the constitution of national identity, which has put Finland on the European map in the first place. At the same time, attempts to internationalise Finnish higher education and reposition it within the current Anglophone hegemony have led to a blunt disregard of these important historical relations at the national policy level. Its remnants still shape the Finnish university sphere and produce friction with the Anglophone-oriented internationalisation practices. Both domestic and international students and staff end up having to continuously grapple with the discrepancies between language policies and practices in their daily lives, as the foregoing vignette shows.
Approaching issues pertaining to language use within the internationalisation policies and practices as technical matters only masks power relations embedded in them. Pointing out the role that language politics in general, and Englishisation, in particular, play in creating higher education peripheries might be the first step in making the process of internationalisation more symmetrical. The acknowledgement of the relevance of language in building and maintaining long-term social relations is also very important. Finally, providing institutional and communal support to language exchanges between domestic and international staff and students could be another way to advance non-Anglophone forms of internationalisation. This would, in turn, allow for international students and staff to become a constitutive part of the university community instead of participating in a tokenistic manner, as is currently the case.

Case study B. International students’ positioning at a university in the UK: Focusing on transnational spaces

While Sonja Trifuljesko’s study in this article analysed language politics and the asymmetry derived from English use in a Finnish University, this case study focuses on international students’ peripheral positionality in a UK university.

The growing mobility of international students derives from an individual desire for social distinction (Marginson 2006), but individual choice is influenced by a global landscape of internationalised higher education dominated by Anglophone countries such as the UK, the United States and Australia. As noted in Nicola Spurling’s (2006) study about Chinese students in the UK and the sense of ‘sojourner’, the recognition of international students’ ‘whole experiences’ beyond the curriculum has been unsuccessful. Rather, universities have generalised international students as temporary residents aiming at degrees in which they have become marginalised. This study explores how the centre and periphery structure in higher education of the Global North have made international students ‘reduce their aspirations and accept their situation’ (Spurling 2006: 113). Further, this study highlights international students’ efforts to form agency across transnational spaces to get their voices heard instead of being peripheralised.
International students in transnational spaces

In this study, transnational spaces are where people, communities and institutions are globally interconnected, and the multiple connections are expected to produce reciprocal benefits through collaborative commitment to knowledge production and dissemination (Choi 2020; Rizvi 2011). Transnational space is a multi-dimensional and non-hierarchal space actively constructed by the participants, ‘creating links between localities and globality’ (Collyer and King 2015: 188).

Internationalised higher education institutions and the internet have the features of a transnational space where international students’ mobility becomes active and so does their engagement over digital space. International students are globally engaged in and through internationalised higher education institutions, and each student, as a valuable resource for diversity, creates a ‘new social network’ and develops ‘a sense of belonging to a cosmopolitan space’ (Singh et al. 2007: 211) beyond the national boundaries. Digital space, as represented by the internet, is also noteworthy as a transnational space since its ‘multiple and messy proximities’ have extended the range of interconnectedness and interdependence among people in a variety of human societies (Rizvi 2010: 162).

The complex relationship between students’ existing identities and their lived experiences abroad creates a never-ending identity negotiation (Marginson 2014) as no identities can be settled as fixed ones. As seen in the cases of this study, active engagement with both locality and globality across physical/digital transnational spaces may lead to self-identification as a cosmopolitan open to the diversity and potentiality of other cultures (Hannerz 2006: 200).

Digital space, in particular, helps international students maintain their connection to locality as much as enhance globality. The continued interaction with people back home through online tools enables people to maintain their sense of ‘otherness’ in a foreign country (Bauman 1990; Zevallos 2011). In fact, people are not positioned equally within the transnational space where centre-periphery relations are reproduced. A complex landscape has been created by each person’s different trajectory, so in what follows, I will explore the voices of international students.
Voices of international students in the UK

I conducted interviews and physical/digital space observations of five international students studying in the UK over one year to explore how international students from the periphery have positioned themselves in higher education institutions and in a country of the centre. The study particularly aims at exploring the role of digital spaces such as university-run digital interface (Blackboard), school homepage and social media in identity negotiation of international students in particular, in connection with transformation of existing national and cultural identities.

Looking back at the recent history of international students in the UK, Thatcher’s government in the 1980s introduced fees for international students with the belief in ‘a much higher level of accountability for public funding and greater accountability for students as customers’ (Grove 2013; Kealey 2013), and such a belief continued in much more active policies by the subsequent Labour government (Guruz 2011: 245), such as the Prime Minister’s Initiative in 1999 (Blair 1999) and the Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education in 2006, which promoted the recruitment of international students by making links with universities overseas (Blair 2006). Now, international students are ‘income earners’ for the university and the UK economy, and they pay much higher fees than UK (or EU) students (Altbach 2015: 2).

The increasing number of international students has contributed to the diversity of higher education institutions (Young et al. 2013) and to the continued prosperity and performance of UK higher education as a source of financial income and intellectual capital (Stein and de Andreotti 2016). Existing literature and empirical data (Knight 2011; Koehne 2005), however, show that the internationalisation of institutions through recruitment of international students does not work out as expected. As Koehne (2005) points out, although higher education systems have embraced the demands of reciprocal academic interactions among countries, the voices of international students have been marginalised in Western pedagogical practices where students have to adopt the standardised academic styles and follow the existing systems. Jane Knight (2011) also notes that international students in many universities feel socially and academically marginalised and often experience tension due to their racial background.

For examples, Leo from China, majoring in biology, is such a case. Studying in the UK was Leo’s dream, so he moved to the UK, where his father
lived in Chinatown, London. However, it was difficult for him to adapt to a new culture and practices. One year after studying at university, Leo found himself marginalised despite his attempts to integrate with local students. Students in his major organised study groups, but he did not belong to any of them because no one had asked him, and he had not volunteered to participate. He said he got accustomed to studying alone: ‘No one forces me to form a study group, [so] I study alone. That is how local students do. I have been to outside class activities but [it is] difficult for me to put myself into that’ (Leo from China).

Leo described his school life as a lonely struggle to challenge stereotypes and negative perceptions about international students, such as lack of English communication skills, no integration with local people, passive participation in local events and cultural misconceptions. He wanted to break invisible barriers by participating in student activities. Hence, one of his proudest moments in university was when he became a member of the Rowing Club. The Rowing Club was composed of only white British members, but Leo was able to build the sense of belonging in the club as teamwork encouraged better communication, sharing and bonding between team members despite cultural differences and language barriers.

Feelings of marginalisation are also found in other students in the study: they wished to be part of university communities but had little interaction with lecturers and classmates. Jinwoo from Korea, for example, said that the four Korean students in his major sat together in class, separated from the local students. He neither asked a question to an instructor nor had a tutoring session because of feelings of inferiority due to a lack of language proficiency and cultural differences in pedagogical practices.

International students also become marginalised when some university staff disregards students’ cultural and historical backgrounds. Somi’s experience resonates with the necessity of instructors’ cultural awareness and understanding: ‘A Chinese lecturer in a class about East Asia said the most miserable country in the world is Korea because Korea is divided. All students looked at me. I felt ashamed’ (Somi from Korea).

Somi’s shame was due to an international lecturer who could have approached the topic in a way that was more sensitive to students’ cultural, historical and political backgrounds. A similar case happened to Anisha, who is from India, in a small seminar where she was the only Asian. Anisha’s tutor misidentified her as a Muslim and mistakenly asked for her views, as a Muslim, on current world affairs.
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However, these international students rarely acted to make their voice heard in class. Such passiveness in class is caused by various factors such as cultural values, individual dispositions or language fluency. Jinwoo, for example, mentioned that he would have asked lecturers questions if he had been in his home country. Despite paying high tuition fees as an international student, Jinwoo, as a first-year student, has not actively articulated his needs and demands to the higher education institution, having neither a sense of agency nor clear identification of himself as a customer of higher education services.

In contrast, digital space has often become an alternative locus for international students’ adaptation. Self-study using a school-run digital platform is such an example as shown in the Anisha’s remark: ‘I spend lots [of] time [on Blackboard] for the lectures online. It is very helpful because in my subject [Law] we would miss out many cases [of law during class]’ (Anisha from India).

The university digital service was originally designed to help students to review large lectures; however, international students may miss the class and depend on the recorded lectures served through the university’s site. The existence of this digital space organised by the university, while being an important source for international students’ self-learning, has another possibility to reinforce passiveness of international students by decreasing physical class attendance. On the other hand, international students actively participate in social events and extracurricular activities by checking updated information over digital space. The following shows how international students make the most of digital platforms in reality:

So many things are happening at university and you miss so often. University sites have events like the street pizza in some place. So you can always go to the university website or Student Union website….Because Facebook has so much information, I should keep on scrolling and I just miss out something. And what happens in the university website is specifically interesting….I can just go to the page and look at all the events. (Anisha from India)

Likewise, while international students do not participate actively in the formal curriculum, they are more active in informal learning spaces where various extracurricular activities take place (Leask 2009). For example, Anisha’s participation in events such as volunteering at an Oxfam Bookshop, Jinwoo’s clubbing at night to make friends outside of college, and James’s
participating in a student society or posting on Facebook are not activities required by the curriculum, but they may contribute to learning from lived experiences. More specifically, digital spaces, such as Facebook, for James from Mauritius, became an essential part of his university life when he started studying in the UK, as most student societies use them for communications and interactions: ‘I became active on Facebook just because of a student society at the university. …Facebook use is not due to pressure but for easiness of everyday communication’ (James from Mauritius).

Activities over digital space have often extended to activities in reality. Information about activities from a social networking site returns to the site with tagged photos, which creates bridges between a wide range of people. Digital space sometimes becomes an indicator of how well international students adapt to their new environment as it shows how they interact with other people through live chats and comments, what social groups and activities they participate in and how their social network is activated and extended.

The digital adaptation process of international students may lead to the emergence of cosmopolitanism or the reinforcement of home-grown cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism here is not confined to ‘cultural cosmopolitanism’ as the ability to appreciate cultural diversity and integrate oneself to other cultures with openness to new experiences (Hannerz 2006: 204). Rather, it is a merged cosmopolitanism between ‘experiences’ and ‘symbolism’ which enables international students to identify the current issues of the world and promote ‘a will to action’ (Hannerz 2006: 204). Anisha, for instance, pointed out that her activities across digital and physical spaces have reinforced the sense of cosmopolitanism cultivated in her home country:

I have been interested global issues since I was young like…I am vegetarian. Pure vegetarian....Then what happened is, during my junior school, we had to do a project....So it was like a team project. So I did the entire project in one side of used paper....My mother is very passionate about issues about pollution something like that. So then doing all is inspirational. Then I do lots of things as well. Tsunami in Indonesia, at that time I also drew copies at school....I sold cards and I sent all the money to Indonesia. (Anisha from India)

As seen above, Anisha has been interested in enhancing environmental sustainability since her childhood in India. Such home-grown cosmopolitanism was reinforced through multicultural experiences while living and studying
in the UK. Simultaneously, despite her love for India, Anisha came to recognise the problems in her home country through global lenses. Likewise, international students make a conscious effort to overcome ‘disequilibrium with their origins and the host country’ (Marginson 2014: 12) by positioning themselves as cosmopolitan with no national boundaries. ‘A cosmopolitan ethos’ (Durante 2014) allows international students to retain a sense of belonging beyond their legitimate status as foreigners in the country of education.

Meanwhile, some international students identify themselves as ‘sojourners’ (Siu 1952: 34) who strive to adjust themselves to the new environment but are always linked to their own ethnic and cultural background. Regardless of the length of the stay in a foreign country, sojourners are never actually assimilated by the new culture, as they do not regard themselves as permanent residents in the country of their sojourn. For example, Leo was especially proud of his engagement in the local students’ Rowing Society, which is usually a very exclusive space, but this sense of pride seems not to translate into a sense of belonging: although membership of the Rowing Society was his achievement as a Chinese student in the UK, Leo stressed that his ‘hearth’ (Tuan 1996) remained in China, his home country: ‘When I do activities only the British do like rowing, I feel closer to this society [and] to British people…[But] I don’t think that affects my national identity’ (Leo from China).

Digital spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enable international students to communicate with friends and family in their home countries, as well as with new people in the UK, and keep them connected to their own home locality while adjusting themselves to a new social context. Hence, digital spaces work as a transnational sphere that reinforces locality as much as globality in accordance with users’ interest and choice. As Michele Schweisfurth and Qing Gu (2009) note, potential changes in international students’ identities do not extend to entire identity reformation since international students maintain their embodied core identities in a turmoil of adjustment processes. As seen in the case of Leo, some international students realise that their core national identity has hardly changed, due to consistent interaction with people and culture from their home countries, across digital and physical spaces: ‘I can never erase the past. For example, I make a cup of coffee with two teaspoons of sugar…. No matter what I add to the coffee, two teaspoons of sugar will always be there. I can’t ignore that’ (Leo from China).
‘Two teaspoons of sugar’ in Leo’s quote refers to his core identity, built up from his home. Leo believes that whatever influences his identities during his living abroad, he can never be rid of his deep-rooted Chinese identity. As Hannerz (1990: 239) noted, people may pick some particular elements of other cultures that suit themselves, amalgamate the pieces with their existing identities and create ‘one kind of cosmopolitanism’ based on their unique perspectives from a collection of experiences. In such an idiosyncratic process of identity negotiation, some international students, as shown in Leo’s case, are more likely to favour their own rooted identity. Identifying themselves as sojourners living in transnational spaces, they experience deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of their national and cultural identities.

Concluding remarks

This study of international students at UK universities shows how they engage in the turmoil of adjustments in which digital and social media play important roles. Some students adopt a position as sojourners in a foreign country. With original national and cultural identities at their core, those students are neither fully integrated into local practices of culture and pedagogy nor engaged with others. Hence, they often feel socially and academically marginalised. While culturally different pedagogical approaches increase the experiences of marginalisation, the sojourners use university digital systems to take lectures instead of going to class in person. Social media in this case help them to stay in touch with their home locality and friends and maintain their identity while temporarily living abroad.

Other students adopt an identity as cosmopolitans or world citizens. They use digital media as transnational and informal learning spaces. The university website becomes a vehicle for their integration into university life, and Facebook becomes not just a source of information about university clubs but also where they post pictures about their participation as a sign of their openness to people, places and experiences in the new environment. As social media allow them to keep in touch with home, the cosmopolitans may display conflicting feelings about their home country and reshape their national and cultural identities.

Likewise, university websites and social media are used by students in different ways to develop diverse identities. The university websites help students’ adaptation but may promote a passive learning environment. If
that is combined with a marginalising pedagogy and curriculum, students may feel more peripheralised. Social media can, however, provide international students the possibility to participate as sojourners or cosmopolitans not only in the university but also in the society. Thus, it is important for international students to activate their own agency over digital and physical spaces. Systematic changes in higher education occur only when the stakeholders for each system realise their role of a game changer. As Fazal Rizvi and Jason Beech (2017) note, international students as the stakeholders can help to turn asymmetric power relations in internationalised higher education into humanity, diversity and impartiality of transnational space.

Conclusion

The article argues that the contemporary approaches to internationalisation can lead to the processes of peripheralisation even in those places in the world that might be, in many respects, considered as centres. It shows that the peripheralisation processes might, in effect, be a direct – albeit unintended – consequence of an attempt of higher education actors to reposition themselves within the contemporary centre-periphery dynamics, through Englishisation or digitalisation. By pointing out how peripheries are created in contexts that lie at the core of the global higher education, this article strengthens the argument – already drafted in the previous article – that the current approaches to internationalisation exacerbate rather than ameliorate existing global power asymmetries.

The two cases presented in this article bring to the fore everyday manifestations of internationalisation by focusing on international doctoral candidates and students and their experience of peripheralisation at a Finnish and a UK university, respectively. What unites both of the case studies is the gap they identified between domestic and foreign staff and students in the university context. Sonja Trifuljesko discussed the manner in which equating internationalisation with Englishisation leads towards the peripheralisation of international doctoral candidates, by keeping them locked within the Anglophone sphere within a non-Anglophone (i.e. Finnish) context. On Hee Choi shows how the digital sphere, which brings relief for international students in the UK in their attempt to adjust to cultural differences, may end up having a similarly peripheralising effect.

What is particularly interesting in both cases is that something that could perhaps be perceived at first glance as an instrument for overcoming
power asymmetries within internationalised higher education actually became a tool for their (re)production. In the Finnish case, the reduction of international communication to a single language (English) in order to conform to the Anglophone hegemony meant that internationalisation became understood as a process external to the local context, as did people who became bearers of it (in this particular case, international doctoral candidates). International students in the UK, on the other hand, saw the refuge from the peripheralisation experience in their everyday lives within the digital space. Some international students develop cosmopolitan identities from digital experiences, but that move in other cases put students even further to the periphery of the university and the country they resided in by keeping them attached to their home countries. Attending to these and similar unintended consequences of internationalisation might be a way to make this process a more even one.

In order to go beyond the current model, and achieve a better balance, internationalisation needs to be reconceptualised, moving from a transactional to a symbiotic process (Tsing 2015b). Such a process is aligned with the general proposal of Susan Wright (2017) for creating ‘liveable universities’. As we show in this article, one of the starting points within the process of internationalisation could be paying attention to agentic engagements of international students and staff in their attempt to overcome experiences of marginalisation and supporting these through structural changes at the transnational, national and institutional level. Thinking about internationalisation in terms of long-term transformative social relations rather than short-term market exchanges is crucial here.

Authorship

The authors’ names are arranged according to the order of the cases they worked on. All authors contributed equally to this article.
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Note
1. I owe my thanks to Anna Medvedeva for being able to formulate this claim.

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