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Geographies of Marketization in Higher Education: Branch Campuses as Territorial and Symbolic Fixes

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Geographies of Marketization in Higher Education: Branch Campuses as Territorial and Symbolic Fixes

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abstract

The role of higher education institutions as active agents of globalization and marketization remains relatively little explored. Economic geographic perspectives are particularly well placed to investigate globalizing higher education as an important economic sector, in addition to its supportive role in the knowledge economy. Drawing on political economic and cultural economic perspectives on marketization and geographic fixes, the study analyzes the motivations and spatial strategies for geographic expansion of universities through the establishment of branch campuses. Based on qualitative interviews with key decision-makers of English universities, I argue that (international) branch campuses enable a range of geographic *fixes* for higher education institutions: a *territorial fix* through the geographic expansion and construction of segmented markets and a *symbolic fix* through the relocation of campuses to places that promise reputational gains. The rapid growth of British branch campuses abroad and domestically (in the *global city* of London) involve substantial financial and reputational risks and as fixes constitute only temporary stabilizations. The conceptualization of symbolic fixes, in addition to territorial fixes, may enable a more nuanced understanding of the role of space in the construction of segmented, yet relational markets that combines intersecting political economic and cultural economic logics.

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> We are in a very, very commercialized environment, both, domestically and internationally. And that is now very strongly the case for the English universities . . . If you are not running a surplus, you will die . . . Now, there is only one game in town—and that is *international*. (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor)[1]

Global competitive pressures confront the English higher education sector and have led to a fundamental reshaping of the economic geographies of higher education in the past decades. Higher education institutions have become marketized, shifting tertiary education from a public good to being treated like a private investment. As in several other countries, the state has sought to create a higher education *market* and reduced public funding of the higher education system, which has forced universities to seek sufficient revenue for their operations elsewhere, including through the introduction (or raising) of tuition fees—including through aggressively recruiting *full-fee-paying* students on international markets (Luke 2005; McGettigan 2013).

Economic geographers have outlined processes of neoliberalization and marketization of higher education within the UK (Hall 2015; Pani 2016). The terms *entrepreneurial university* and *academic capitalism* have been developed to capture a range of different transformations, based on management techniques such as New Public Management and involving processes of commercialization, marketization, and financialization (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Münch 2014; Jessop 2017). The increasingly global competitive pressures on universities have led to a crisis for higher education systems in the UK and the US, including the threat of bankruptcy of individual institutions (Christopherson, Gertler, and Gray 2014; *The Economist* 2018).

Parallel to the marketization of higher education, a rapid geographic expansion of higher education institutions has taken shape through the construction of international branch campuses. To date, the rationales of higher education institutions to open branch campuses, both internationally and domestically, remain relatively opaque. This article analyzes these ostensibly different spatial processes as *related* strategies that are developed to overcome limitations in local higher education *markets* and empirically ana-

[1] The research is based on interviews conducted between October 2018 and March 2019 with respondents in the UK. Please see "Methodology" for further details.

lyzes the drivers for the geographic expansion of UK universities from an economic geographic perspective.

The role of higher education institutions as active agents in processes of marketization and globalization, to date, remains relatively little explored. Analyses of the globalization of higher education tend to focus on the state as an actor, for instance, in studies on the rescaling of education *policy* (Robertson, Bonal, and Dale 2002; Komljenovic and Robertson 2017; Parreira do Amaral, Thompson, and Steiner-Khamsi 2019). Less research has focused on higher education institutions as actors driving globalization processes and their decision-making from an economic geographic perspective. I build upon the work of geographical political economists who have argued that geographic expansion and the *spatial fix* (Harvey 1981, 2001) constitute one option to temporarily solve the crisis of capitalist accumulation to develop the idea of branch campuses as *fixes* for higher education institutions. To what extent do universities employ geographic fixes to overcome funding crises and what spatial strategies do they use?

The case study serves as a way to explore broader sociospatial transformations *through* education (Thiem 2009) and contributes to theorizing the constructed, segmented, and territorial nature of *globalizing* markets and the constitutive role of space in market-making processes (Alvarez León, Yu, and Christophers 2018). The theorization builds upon economic geographers' work from a cultural political economy perspective that focuses on the construction of *material and symbolic value* in an integrated fashion (Hudson 2005). It thus differs from Jessopian (capitalized) Cultural Political Economic interrogations that tend to focus on macroscale processes and semiotic constructions of the knowledge-based economy at the nation-state level, remaining at high levels of abstraction (Jessop 2004; Sum and Jessop 2013). Instead, I provide a grounded empirical case study taking into view key economic actors' motivations and strategies. This conceptualization provides a lens through which to study macroprocesses of crisis and structural change at the level of firms and institutions to individually assess their strategies that collectively form fixes at the sectoral level. By combining geographical political economy ideas of fixes (Bok 2019), with cultural economic approaches that have investigated processes of marketization and highlighted the importance of symbolic value, I show how spatial strategies of market-making involve both regulatory and reputational strategies underlying territorial fixes and symbolic fixes.

Empirically, it is shown how decreasing state funding, marketization, and mounting competitive pressures of universities within the UK have led to an outward orientation and dis-embedding from the domestic context of universities. International branch campuses play an important role in accessing new markets and circumventing restrictions in the home market. Regulated by the General Agreement on Trade in Services, branch campuses enable the export of UK higher education and render higher education, even when stemming from public universities, into a commercial service delivered from a locally established subsidiary.[2] They construct segmented and relational markets for higher education in a quest to solve or fix financial problems and alleviate contemporary crisis situations such as Brexit.

[2] The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) came into effect in 1995 and differentiates between four modes of services trade, depending upon the territorial presence of *supplier* and *consumer*. All four modes exist in higher education: mode 1: cross-border trade (e.g., online education), mode 2: consumption abroad (e.g., incoming international students), mode 3: commercial presence (e.g., international branch campuses), and mode 4: presence of natural persons (e.g., lecturers teaching abroad) (World Trade Organization n.d.).

The next section combines political economic and cultural economic perspectives on geographic fixes and marketization as a theoretical background to understanding the spatial strategies of higher education institutions. This is followed by a section that explains the qualitative methodology and is followed by a presentation of the empirical results. I show how (international) branch campuses may constitute a spatial fix through the geographic expansion to new markets, employing a *territorial fix* of bypassing territorial regulations in the UK and enabling differential pricing, and a *symbolic fix* through the relocation of campuses to cities that offer reputational gains through associating university *brands* with particular places. These processes not only play out on the global scale but also within the national territory through relocation strategies to the *global city* of London. The final section cautions that branch campus investments are subject to considerable financial and reputational risks, and thus constitute only temporary stabilizations. The conclusion sketches the relevance of conceptualizing territorial and symbolic fixes for economic geography beyond higher education markets.

Marketization and Geographic Fixes

Geographies of Marketization and the Territorial Fix

Geographical political economists have set out to understand capitalism and its continuing survival despite its crisis-prone nature. Harvey (1981, 1982, 2001) famously introduces the notion of a spatial fix as the strategy for temporarily resolving crises of overaccumulation or enabling further accumulation through geographic relocation and expansion. The idea of the spatial fix, as a temporary solution to capitalism's contradictions, has initially been linked to an *outer* transformation of capitalism through imperialism and colonialism (Harvey 1981). It can be used to signify the geographic expansion to new (education) markets to solve problems of accumulation and enabling selective dis-embedding from the home territory and its regulations and restrictions.[3] The notion of various fixes in economic geography has primarily been used for macrolevel theorizations to explain the large-scale transformations of historic state-capital relations but is also acknowledged to constitute an adaptive, "malleable" and "mobile metaphor" (Bok 2019, 1088). Here, the notion of the fix is used in its sense as a temporary solution to funding crises strategically employed at the mesolevel of organizations by investment decision-makers.

More recent work by geographical political economists has connected the idea of the spatial fix and capitalist geographic expansion to the geographies of markets and processes of marketization (Christophers 2014; Alvarez León, Yu, and Christophers 2018). Christophers (2014, 755) shifts attention away from a focus on large-scale periodic shifts of capitalism to a "subset of such wider fixes" and argues that "modern capitalism is constantly in the process of *enacting territorial fixes*: constituting, segmenting, differentiating and extracting value from actively *territorialized markets* at a range of geographical scales." He uses the term *territorial fix* to signify the creation of different, segmented geographic markets to enable differential pricing as a strategy to increase overall profits in different industries (in his examples pharmaceuticals and television) (Christophers 2014). Tuition fees in the UK fulfill three conditions of segmented markets: First, the provider has market-making power (through an attractively

[3] The spatial fix has a second meaning of pinning assets down or fixing them in place, for instance, through real estate investments (Harvey 2001), which is an interesting argument to consider in relation to universities' investments in physical presences abroad.

branded degree) but cannot set prices without the support of the state. Second, segmentation exists by nationality and/or residency with the ability to pay differential prices. Third, these markets are kept separated through state regulation (Christophers 2014). The territorial fix is thus comprised of segmented markets for English university education, in which tuition fees are based upon nationality/residency criteria. The state is an important though often underacknowledged actor in market-making processes. Hall (2018) discusses the importance of regulation as coconstituting the territoriality of markets as a way to bring cultural economic analysis of the marketization of finance in closer dialogue with geographical political economy literature.

By connecting the territorial fixes to debates on marketization (see Berndt and Boeckler 2009, 2012), Alvarez León, Yu, and Christophers (2018) build a fruitful bridge to cultural economic geographic work. Cultural economic and science and technology literature on marketization has shown how markets are complex sociotechnical arrangements that draw in a range of human and nonhuman actors and technologies (Çalışkan and Callon 2010). Markets are thus *framed* but also characterized by escapes of these framings or *overflows* (Callon 1998). These ideas have also been applied to understanding marketization in higher education (Hall 2015; Komljenovic and Robertson 2017). Hall (2015) shows how the marketization of undergraduate tuition fees in the UK is based on a territorial logic, since tuition fees differ between the countries of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland),[4] which is justified with reference to domestic graduate salaries. The internationalization of UK higher education leads to overflows of this territorial framing of markets and disrupts the marketization process (Hall 2015).

Hall's argument about the territorial nature of marketization processes in higher education can be extended in relation to internationalization in two ways. First, he argues that differential tuition fees currently exist not only between different regions within the UK but also between different groups of people, with a fundamental distinction between *UK and EU-students* on the one hand, and (non-EU) *international students* on the other hand. The latter pay substantially higher (nongovernment regulated) tuition fees. While international organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the OECD define *international students* as people migrating from one country to another for the purpose of study, that is, who are not residents of their country of study or who received their prior education in another country (OECD 2013), the UK classification of international students refers to their *categorization in terms of tuition fees*. Following calls by postcolonial scholars to unpack the category of the international student as a socially and historically constructed and contingent category (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2015), it is important to highlight the arbitrary and contingent categorization of international students, which leads to price discrimination.[5]

[4] Maximum tuition fees for domestic (and EU students) are set by the government at the level of £9,250 in England, £3,810 in Wales, £3,805 in Northern Ireland; no fees exist in Scotland (in the academic year 2018/19).

[5] Students from other EU member states pay the same fees as domestic students in most European countries. International students are the leftover category of unprotected consumers with variable fees, who pay on average £6,000 more than UK/EU students (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018). The attraction of international students to the UK, who pay substantially higher fees and thus contribute a very large share to overall budgets of many universities, has not only become a key strategy but also over time made institutions dependent on these flows. The total income UK universities receive from non-EU student fee income amounted to £4.5 billion in 2016, an increase of 68 percent since 2010 (Department for Education 2019).

Second, the argument of differential territorial logics operating in the UK's education market can be extended through an analysis of how these territorial logics interact with internationalization strategies and may be exported through campuses offshore. As there are limitations of how many students can be attracted to UK universities, also due to migration regulations, the export of UK higher education through service delivery abroad has enabled universities to tap into new consumer markets overseas. These onshore and offshore markets are relational. When British higher education degrees are offered abroad, the domestic territorial fix remains intact.

Geographies of Reputation and the Symbolic Fix

Bringing together political geographic and cultural economic geographic analysis enables us to combine geographies of production and consumption. Economic geographers with a geographical political economic perspective have tended to focus on production geographies, whereas those from a cultural economic perspective have argued for an increased focus on geographies of consumption and for engaging more seriously with the question of symbolic value and the geographies of brands and branding (Hudson 2005; Pike 2013). Over time, the importance of symbolic value, above all for status goods, has increased, which may be entangled with the reputational value of particular places. Symbolic value can thus be accrued through branding and the fostering of positive associations that translate to economic value by establishing a reputational link to regions and places (Pike 2013). I suggest the term *symbolic fix* as another subset of geographic fixes to connote the spatial strategy of economic actors to increase overall profits by accruing *place-based reputational value* through their location choices.

This is particularly relevant for status or positional goods that depend critically on symbolic value such as higher education (Marginson 2004). The valuation of higher education occurs through standardized assessments (such as the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework [TEF] and the Research Excellence Framework [REF]) and national and international rankings, which act as calculative devices (Çalışkan and Callon 2010). Global university rankings were first introduced in 2003 and have since proliferated. The most prominent rankings include the TEF ranking, the QS World University ranking, and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities. The rankings have performative qualities: "[Higher education institutions] are knowledge intensive industries behaving as other actors/firms in a competitive environment; to survive and thrive, many institutions are making changes to institutional strategy or adapting their behavior to fit the norm promulgated by rankings. Their behavior is influenced by the perception that benefits—whether it is more and better able students, increased resources or enhanced prestige—flow to those who, according to rankings, are best" (Hazelkorn 2015, 11–12). Internationalization is often a key indicator in rankings to determine the *quality* of an institution; thus the ambition to occupy a higher position in the rankings may also motivate internationalization strategies of higher education managers.

Siltaoja, Juusola, and Kivijärvi (2019) argue that terms, such as *excellence* or *world-class*, are central to universities' branding attempts and competition in global education markets but are ideological rather than substantive categories that shift attention to the image and brand value that, moreover, tends to be collapsed with Western institutions in postcolonial contexts. The symbolic value is based on historic colonial relations of domination and (neo-)colonial imaginaries, which can be commercially exploited in postcolonial contexts where Western education is perceived as inherently superior (Sidhu 2006; Le-Ha 2017; Siltaoja, Juusola, and Kivijärvi 2019).

The symbolic fix thus further spells out the argument that "the making of a new market always requires and reproduces particular geographic imaginations and representations" (Alvarez León, Yu, and Christophers 2018, 214; see also Hall 2018). The reputational geographies of places intersect with the reputational geographies of higher education established in global university rankings (Jöns and Hoyler 2013). The notion of a symbolic fix is suggested to describe economic actors' geographic expansion to well-known or positively connoted places as a way of *dissociating* from actual places of origin (Ibert et al. 2019) and associating with places that signify a reputational gain and command a premium in hierarchically structured geographic imaginaries. The following case study of globalizing higher education from the UK is motivated by the quest to understand how territorial and symbolic fixes are employed by institutions to circumvent domestic market restrictions and remain financially viable in an increasingly marketized environment.

Methodology

The study started with desktop research to map currently operating international and domestic branch campuses of UK universities. I define international branch campuses for the purpose of this study as *physical presences of universities that deliver foreign university degrees abroad (alone or in collaboration with academic or business partners)*. The definition does not differentiate according to the size of these operations, nor their ownership structures, which include joint venture or franchise arrangements, providing these possess physical infrastructures and use the (brand) name of the sending institution.

Then, English universities[6] were purposively sampled for in-depth interviews to reflect the diversity of actors involved according to their profiles (teaching or research intensive) and their geographic origins. The participating twelve universities include a diverse mix of research-intensive as well as teaching-intensive institutions, which all had active international operations abroad.[7] Geographically, the sample ranged from universities in the largest English cities, as well as more peripherally located actors in the Northeast, Northwest, and South of England, to account for the variety of places of origin that universities seek to reach out from and stretch beyond to take on a more global role (Cochrane and Williams 2013).

The respondents were key senior decision-makers responsible for internationalization strategies at their institutions. Depending on the universities' governance structures, they were either current or former university board members at the level of the vice-president or pro-vice chancellor, or directors of separate offices, for example, for internationalization or global engagement. Most interviews were conducted with one respondent from each institution, but two interviews involved more than one respondent. All interviews with university respondents (except for two) were conducted face-to-face on campus to gain a better understanding of the perspective of decision-makers in their situated roles and focused on the drivers, rationales, and strategies for international expansion through branch campus development.

These twelve interviews were complemented with four expert interviews (including via Skype or telephone) to gain a broader understanding of universities' transnational higher education strategies and triangulate findings. The respondents included

[6] Universities are regulated differently across the four nations of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland). A focus on England was chosen since English universities are most dependent on tuition fees and overseas income and provide the largest sample.

[7] Except for one university, which had discontinued its offshore campus but operated a domestic, London-based branch campus.

representatives of the industry body of universities, Universities UK International, the British Council, the Quality Assurance Agency, and an education consultant. All interviews were conducted between October 2018 and March 2019. They were voice recorded, subsequently transcribed, and thematically analyzed to understand the rationales for universities' spatial strategies.

Geographies of Marketization: Spatial Strategies of Universities

The UK higher education system is undergoing major transformations from a publicly funded system toward privatization. The introduction of market logics and mechanisms include rolling out a system of income-contingent loans in England (McGettigan 2013). *Roll-back* neoliberalism[8] has decreased direct public funding of higher education institutions, for instance, through the reduction of block grants for undergraduate teaching. It pushes universities to acquire funding by competing on markets for tuition fees (including from international students), competitive research funding, and philanthropy of alumni (Warren, Hoyler, and Bell 2014; Hall 2015).[9]

The competition between universities for funding takes place at different scales but increasingly shift toward the global scale through the construction of a *global education industry* (Marginson 2004; Parreira do Amaral, Thompson, and Steiner-Khamsi 2019). The UK government identified higher education as its fifth-largest *export* sector and forecasts an increase of economic revenue from £20 billion to £35 billion by 2030, largely based on the attraction of international students to the UK (HM Government 2019). The export-orientation of universities has coincided with the move of universities from being administered by the Department of Education to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills[10] (McGettigan 2013). The transformation of higher education into a capitalist market economy involves the "transformation of universities and research into private profit-maximizing enterprises or, at least, non-profit private, public or hybrid organizations that seek to maximize net revenues, especially where the state is no longer the primary source of funds [. . . leading to] greater investment in revenue-generating operations such as medical centers, sporting facilities, student accommodation and the conference trade at the expense of core education functions" (Jessop 2017, 861). One element of such strategies of extra–revenue-generating activities may be the export of education through the development of international branch campuses.

Figure 1 shows how international branch campus development from the UK started in the 1990s and grew strongly post-1997, following the introduction of tuition fees and the simultaneous cutting of state funding for higher education (Robertson 2010). In 2016, *transnational education*, or the export of entire programs through franchises, articulation agreements, joint ventures, and branch campuses abroad, contributed £610 million to the UK's gross domestic product, an increase of 72 percent since

[8] For a comparison to income-contingent loans in the US and Australia, see Bryant and Spies-Butcher (2020).

[9] The total income for higher education providers from the UK in the academic year 2017–18, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency was £38 billion. The largest income derived from domestic and overseas tuition fees and education contracts (£19 billion) and other income (£7 billion), which includes partnership fees and income from commercial subsidiaries, including overseas branch campuses. Research grants and contracts (£6 billion) and public funding body grants (£5 billion) accounted for lower sums. In contrast to the US, endowments constitute less than £600 million.

[10] The higher education sector in the UK is regulated and receives funding from the state but is otherwise independent from it.

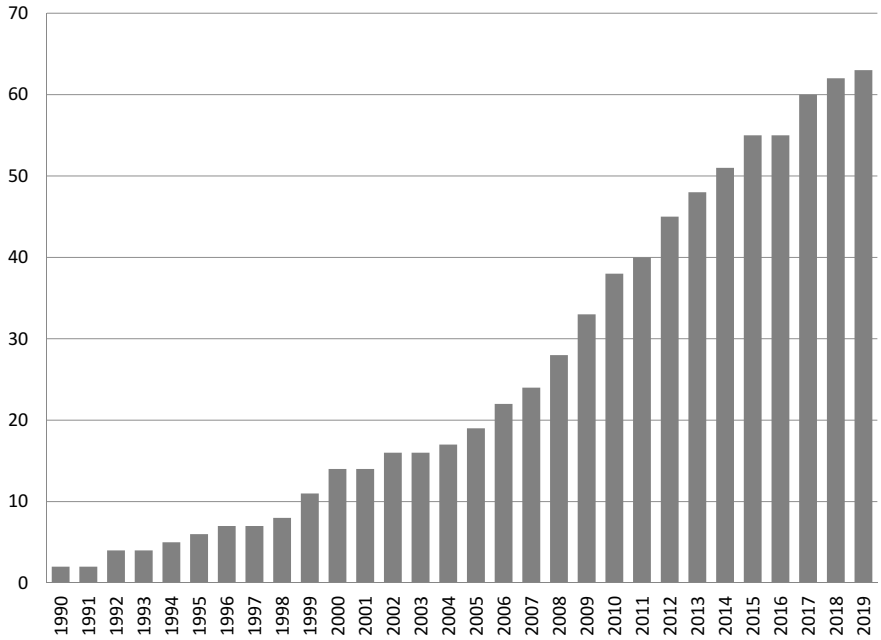

Figure 1. Number of UK's international branch campuses by year.
Source: author, based on desk-top research.

2010 (Department for Education 2019). The rise of branch campus development was not simply motivated by fostering international academic engagement of UK universities but was developed in reaction to the marketization of the UK's higher education system, which has made individual institutions dependent on generating revenue through tuition fees, research grants, and increasingly other entrepreneurial activities. The operation of overseas subsidiaries or branches turns higher education institutions effectively into transnational economic actors engaging in "multinational activity that borrows heavily from corporate marketing, global branding, and expansion strategies" (Luke 2005, 160).

To date, most literature discussing higher education institutions' motivations for opening international branch campuses has been based on the experiences of Australian and American universities (see Lane and Kinser 2011). Existing analysis largely draws on singular case studies or literature reviews. It stipulates as main motivations access to new sources of revenue, increasing status, reputation and prestige, and benefits of internationalization for the educational experience and research (Altbach and Knight 2007; Krollpfeiffer and Kosmützky 2012; Wilkins and Huisman 2012).

Universities in the stratified hierarchy of higher education institutions[11] in the UK employ different spatial strategies. Among those institutions that have set up international branch campuses, it is possible to broadly distinguish between two groups.

[11] It is important to keep in mind that the majority of institutions do not operate international branch campuses, the reasons for which are diverse. Elite universities such as the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, are generally perceived to be under less pressure to set up campuses abroad to increase their markets, since they are able to attract higher numbers of domestic and international students based on their research profile and/or attractive (London) location.

A first group of institutions includes international business schools (with campuses in Europe and/or major global cities) and primarily research-intensive universities, which set up international branch campuses early on to build the reputation of global institutions (Hawawini 2016). The University of Nottingham's large-scale campuses in Semenyih, Malaysia, and Ningbo, China (that are architecturally styled to resemble the home campus, including reproductions of the iconic Trent Tower building in all locations) is one example of such a proactive strategy of constructing the institution's image as a global player and sheds its image as a regional university, which is also visible in the incorporation of the branch campus[12] locations into the university logo (*Nottingham University—UK, China, Malaysia*). Today, however, the idea of gaining international academic reputation *through* the development of international campuses has lost traction. The majority of more recent international branch campus developments have been less connected to signaling internationalization as a value proposition for students in the UK. In contrast, they are more directly connected to market expansion and the creation of direct income streams for institutions that find themselves in a difficult competitive position within the national context.

A second group of higher education institutions has established branch campuses to acquire direct and indirect financial benefits by attracting otherwise unattainable international students to their overseas campus, to a London-based campus, or to their home campus (using for instance 2 + 2–year mobility schemes). These mobility schemes transfer students after an initial period of study at the international branch campus (usually two years) to the home campus in the UK (for another two years) to complete their degrees. A recent study by the British Council (2020) found that 16 percent of all non-UK students had started their degree at an offshore provider, showing how transnational education presents an important pathway to *onshore* education. Thus, the establishment of branch campuses abroad constitutes one possible option in the strategic tool kit to ensure financial viability for revenue-seeking universities that tends to work in support of, rather than as an alternative to, aggressive international student recruitment to the UK.

While the argument of building reputation is still voiced as a key motivation by many respondents, the actual meaning of reputation in these statements requires unpacking, as it often connotes *brand recognition* and the ability to attract international students to the UK, rather than increasing the institutions' academic reputation for domestic students. In the contemporary case of neoliberalized universities under funding pressure, gaining financial income and reputation can be seen as ultimately driven by the pursuit of *direct* and *indirect* financial benefits. The shift from state funding to tuition fee-based funding, and the associated premium placed upon non-European student recruitment, has created an increasingly volatile and uncertain situation for higher education institutions that are affected by shifts in foreign demand and changing visa regulations or other forms of international mobility restrictions, for which a (geographic) diversification of income suggests a solution (Interview Vice-President). My argument is that universities' motivation to open international and domestic branch campuses represent spatial fixes, both territorial and symbolic in nature, that are largely deployed as competitive strategies by institutions under financial pressure.

Table 1 lists international branch campuses of UK universities. In 2018, there were a total of sixty-two international branch campuses operated by a total of forty-one

[12] Interviewees often point to the influential role of key university leaders in advancing these plans, which are often seen as individual and institutional prestige projects by Vice-Chancellors of universities.

Table 1

British Universities' International Branch Campuses

Higher Education Institution	Branch Campus Location
England	
Aston University/Cranfield University Muscat University	Muscat (Oman)
Bath Spa University	Ras al-Khaimah (UAE)
CASS Business School	Dubai (UAE)
De Montfort University	Sandton (South Africa)[1]
Lancaster University	Accra (Ghana)
	Weihai (China)
Liverpool University Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University	Suzhou (China)
London Business School	Dubai (UAE)
Middlesex University	Dubai (UAE)
	Mauritius
Newcastle University	Johor (Malaysia)
	Singapore
University College London	Doha (Qatar)[1]
	Adelaide (Australia)[1]
University of Bolton	Ras al-Khaimah (UAE)
University of Bradford	Dubai (UAE)
University of Central Lancashire	Baoding (China)
	Mauritius
	Cyprus
University of Coventry/University of Wolverhampton Middle East College	Muscat (Oman)
University of Exeter	Dubai (UAE)
University of Kent	Athens (Greece)
	Brussels (Belgium)
	Paris (France)
	Rome (Italy)
University of Leeds Southwest Jiaotong University Leeds	Chengdu (China)
University of London	Paris (France)
University of London/University of Staffordshire British University of Vietnam	Hanoi (Vietnam)
University of Manchester Business School Centers	Dubai (UAE)
	Hong Kong
	Sao Paolo (Brazil)
	Shanghai (China)
	Singapore
University of Northampton Myanmar Imperial University	Yangon (Myanmar)
University of Nottingham	Semenyih (Malaysia)
	Ningbo (China)
University of Reading	Johor (Malaysia)
University of Reading—Henley Business School	Copenhagen (Denmark)
	Helsinki (Finnland)
	Johannesburg (South Africa)
	Malta
	Munich (Germany)
University of Salford British University of Bahrain	Bahrain
University of Sheffield International Faculty CITY College	Thessaloniki (Greece)
University of Southampton	Johor (Malaysia)
University of Surrey	Dalian (China)
University of West London	Ras al-Khaimah (UAE)
University of Wolverhampton	Mauritius[1]
Westminster University	Tashkent (Uzbekistan)
Wales	
Aberystwyth University	Mauritius[1]
Bangor University	Changsha (China)
University of South Wales	Dubai (UAE)
Scotland	
Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU)	New York City (USA)
	Muscat (Oman)
GCU African Leadership University	Kigali (Rwanda)
	Mauritius
GCU Grameen Caledonian College of Nursing	Dhaka (Bangladesh)
Glasgow School of Arts	Singapore
Heriot-Watt University	Dubai (UAE)
	Putrajaya (Malaysia)
Strathclyde Business School International Centre	Abu Dhabi (UAE)
	Dubai (UAE)
University of Aberdeen AFG College	Doha (Qatar)
University of Edinburgh College of Fashion and Innovation	Shanghai (China)
University of Glasgow	Singapore
University of Stirling	Ras al-Khaimah (UAE)
Northern Ireland	
Queen University of Belfast 'China Medical University'	Shenbei (China)

[1]Closed, [2]Closure announced.

Source: Author, based on desk-top research, 2018.

institutions, of which thirty originated from England, eight from Scotland, two from Wales, and one from Northern Ireland. Three campuses (in Muscat and Hanoi) were operated collaboratively by two higher education institutions from the UK. The higher education institutions each have between one and five international branch campuses. Additionally, several campuses that have closed again, or are set to close, are listed in the table.

The majority of the UK's offshore campuses are based in former British colonial territories and in major source countries for international students in the UK. The decision where to open a branch campus abroad is not simply based on universities' internationalization strategies in front of an empty canvas of locational opportunities but is strongly influenced by host-countries' active policies to attract university investments (Olds 2007; Lane 2011; Wilkins and Huisman 2012). The interviewed institutions in the UK have usually been approached by a host government or business partner from abroad with the suggestion to open a campus; thus decision-makers often perceive location choice as a matter of *chance* or *serendipity*. In these instances, it is less the appeal of a particular cooperation partner or location tied to the academic or institutional strategy, but rather the opportunity to increase revenues that lead universities to decide to open international branch campuses and start overseas partnerships. In particular, institutions that find themselves struggling to attract students in the home market and occupy the lower ranks of national university rankings may see opportunities in the global markets and aim to conquer education's *frontier markets* (see Robertson and Komljenovic 2016) to increase revenue.

Regulations, Territorial Fixes, and Related Offshore-Onshore Markets

Geographic expansion, in highly regulated education markets, is based upon the (perceived) opportunity for profit accumulation in new markets, akin to a spatial fix. An important motivation for universities is the opportunity to overcome the limits of the domestic market. In the UK context, decision-makers at universities explain how international branch campus development offers the ability to circumvent regulatory restrictions in the home territory in two ways. First, it provides a way to increase the market for international students, despite the constraints of the UK's immigration policy:

> Universities felt that the constraints with regard to recruiting students to the UK meant they have to do something else to be more creative on how they engage internationally. And if an institution wants to maintain its relevance, its reputation in a country, while they cannot bring students to the UK, then the education provision has to be exported there and delivered locally. And this is a way to operate outside the constraints of the Home Office. (Interview Education Consultant)

A Pro-Vice Chancellor corroborates this argument: "We had to think how we get around visa regulations, visa restrictions, so that is why we went offshore as well." Second, it allows universities to circumvent regulations on the amount of tuition fees that can be charged: "It gives us another income flow what we regard as being 'non-regulated'. So, it is not controlled by the UK government. We can decide on the amount that we do, and we can decide on the price that we set. And so, it gives us a little bit more control over our income flows (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor). Access to larger student markets, particularly in a context of more narrowly set (student) visa restrictions and the ability to set prices independent of home government regulations

are thus in the eyes of senior decision-makers key factors for devising territorial fixes to overcome territorial regulations.

The tuition fees at international branch campuses are adapted to local conditions, though *international student fees* in England function as an implicit or explicit baseline for comparison. The University of Southampton Malaysia, for instance, proactively advertises this factor, as their website headline reads: "Study for a top Engineering degree in Malaysia and the UK for 60 percent of the cost," a calculation that is based on international student fees in the UK and living expenses.[13] The territorial fix thus comprises moving beyond territorially regulated home markets and enabling differential pricing. The fact that tuition fees are calculated and justified in relation to each other shows how segmented but related markets are constructed.

Both teaching-intensive and research-intensive institutions are convinced of the reputational benefits of offshore presences that translate into economic benefits *for international student recruitment at home*. By establishing a campus in a foreign location that is also a major source of international students in the UK, prospective international students are confronted with the institutions' presence in their home city or at education fairs, see its local advertisements, or have personal contacts with students at the branch campus. Thus, the offshore campus becomes a marketing office that facilitates international student recruitment and enables indirect income through international students' tuition fees in the UK. One respondent argues that it "is our aspiration, to raise brand awareness overseas that also attracts students back home to campus" (Interview Director). While the impact of brand awareness is hard to calculate, many internationalization managers relate it to higher international student numbers at the *home* campus of the institution. Student mobility schemes (such as 2 + 2–year arrangements), moreover, enable the conversion of offshore students to onshore students in the UK and thus enable the generation of additional income for the university (see British Council 2020).

This strategy has the advantage that income may flow to the university in the UK, despite rules and regulations in place in many investment-receiving countries, such as China, that prohibit the repatriation of profits from overseas education providers. This proves to be so lucrative that decision-makers may even decide to run branch campuses at a loss, due to the significant tuition fee income the branch campuses provide for the home institution, explains a respondent, whose institution receives fifty or more international students transferring from China each year from their offshore campus (Interview Vice-President). This shows how mobility of institutions to deliver degrees abroad and international student mobilities are *related markets*. The attraction of more students to the onshore market can be a key financial driver for setting up branch campuses offshore.

Reputation, Symbolic Fixes, and Related Domestic and International Branch Campus Strategies

The place of origin of a university shapes its ability to become a global institution (Cochrane 2018). One respondent explains the motivation for setting up an offshore campus as follows:

> One of the key factors that determines where you rank internationally is reputation. And so, given that we are only young, given that we are on a hill in the Northwest of England, we are not near a city with a big football team—people don't know who we are. So, we decided to

[13] University of Southampton Malaysia, https://www.southampton.ac.uk/my.

> go offshore. To take what we do and try to raise our profile, raise our reputation and spread the word about [city/university] that way. (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor)

Beyond institutional prestige, the attractiveness of a city matters for international student recruitment. Shifting location means universities may tap into the reputational benefits of another city than that of their origin. The ability to benefit from the reputational value of other places, either through establishing a network of branches in prestigious cities abroad or by moving to the domestic capital, constitutes a symbolic fix. Previous research has shown how business schools, for instance, may want to be situated in international financial centers, which they advertise on the basis of spatial proximity to financial services actors, despite the fact that proximity may not necessarily translate into actual collaborations and may simply constitute a branding strategy (Hall 2008). An interviewee similarly highlights the reputational value of being based in financial centers: "From a brand perspective, leveraging [mentions several global financial cities . . .] gives us a competitive advantage" (Interview Director). Reputation works on different scales and also intraurban location choices can be taken strategically with brand value in mind, elaborates the respondent: "So again, that is brand. We are not choosing to be fifteen miles out in some industrial park. That would be much cheaper, but for the brand reputation, it is not how we want to position ourselves" (Interview Director).

Opening branch campuses enables universities not only to establish themselves as global players with an international network of campuses but may also enable them to, at least discursively, shift their place of *origin*, if this is perceived to be of limited reputational value on overseas markets. In this sense, the construction of symbolic value entails both the association with places perceived to have higher reputational value, while similarly actively dissociating from places of origin (see Ibert et al. 2019). Particularly higher education institutions from smaller and more peripheral places see a reputational benefit in establishing a second domestic campus in London to be associated with the metropolis.

London plays an interesting role within the shifting economic geographies of UK higher education. Table 2 shows that seventeen universities established domestic branch campuses since 1999, with the majority opening in the past ten years. In 2019, thirteen domestic branch campuses were in operation, but four have closed since.

Domestic branch campus development in the Canadian context has been argued to facilitate access of lower-income and nontraditional students, who are more *tied to place* due to financial and time constraints and benefit from campus proximity (Addie, Keil, and Olds 2015). In theory, branch campus development could also be a strategy deployed to achieve regionally distributed economic growth. However, no spatial Keynesianism is at play in the excessive agglomeration of domestic branch campuses in London. The UK's Quality Assurance Agency's investigation has shown that domestic campuses in London had an average of 652 students, and their "main reason was to increase the recruitment of international students who would be more attracted to London than to the home campus" (Quality Assurance Agency 2014, 1). Website analysis of London-based branch campuses similarly revealed that the "proximity to (and presence in) London is sold as a clear and discernible asset" (Brooks and Waters 2018, 6).

My respondents similarly point to the importance of both reputational gains through association with London and its related link to new sources of income: "First and foremost it was about branded presence in the capital city. But then secondly, also about an alternative income flow, another income channel for us, other than our

Table 2

UK Universities' Branch Campuses in London

Opening Year	University	Origin
1999	University of Cumbria	England
2007	Anglia Ruskin University	England
2009	Coventry University	England
2010	Glasgow Caledonian University	Scotland
2010	University of East Anglia[1]	England
2011	Glynd r University[1]	Wales
2011	University of Ulster	Northern Ireland
2011	Bangor University[1]	Wales
2012	University of Sunderland	England
2012	University of Wales Trinity Saint David	Wales
2013	University of Liverpool	England
2014	Northumbria University	England
2014	University of South Wales[1]	Wales
2015	Newcastle University[2]	England
2015	University of Loughborough	England
2015	University of Warwick	England
2016	University of West of Scotland	Scotland

[1]Closed, [2]Closure announced.

Source: Author, based on Quality Assurance Agency (2014) and online search.

[universities' main campus] base" (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor). Branch campus expansion to London thus enables a reputational gain, a *symbolic fix* for being associated with an attractive city, which is of primary importance for recruiting international fee-paying students.

Universities from lesser well-known cities struggle to get a place on (prospective) international students' mental maps of education destinations, making it harder for institutions based in these places to recruit internationally. One respondent elaborates on the perceived reputational weaknesses of their institutions' location:

> We do not necessarily have the benefits of universities that are based in cities, where their visibility is strong overseas. [. . .] So, there is a sort of halo effect that some universities have. [University location] is not in a big city [. . .]. So, there were certain things that, in a sense, were not in our favor. (Interview former Pro-Vice Chancellor)

Arguments brought forward by respondents why a university faces a difficult competitive situation are connected to its place of origin and include difficult to pronounce city names or the absence of a Premier League football club. While these may seem trivial, the effects of place-based reputational weaknesses are financially consequential in the competition for international students and have been drivers for universities to invest in domestic and international branch campuses.

Beyond this rather direct symbolic fix, universities can also indirectly increase their reputational value in rankings by moving to London, as one respondent explains:

> There is another argument: That part of the League Table rankings is a function of "value-added" of wages, what wage you receive when you go out in the big wide world. So, if you're recruiting students in [Northern city] that live in [same Northern city] and then leave and work in [same Northern city], because of the nature of economic geography, wages in London are much higher for the same job than they are here. So, there's a benefit in it that way. (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor)

In this sense, branch campus development in London serves as a way to compensate for structural disadvantages that universities outside of London face in ranking metrics,[14] due to the highly uneven economic geographies of the UK in relation to wages.

Respondents often relate the opening of domestic campuses in London and international branch campuses to each other and explain how they follow similar logics. The London campus, in some institutions, even falls under the responsibility of the Vice-President for *Internationalization*, together with other overseas branch campuses. The respondent argues that their institution takes a similar approach when they "come into an international city" (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor). London is thus strategically and discursively placed offshore. The spatial fix operates at a different scale, builds upon the symbolic value of London for international students, and follows similar rationales and strategies for international market expansion as overseas campuses. While still falling under the remit of territorial regulations, such as visa regulations in the UK, the institutions tap into the symbolic value of London to increase their access to students. In contrast to regulations prohibiting the repatriation of profits from certain offshore campus jurisdictions (such as China), no regulation prevents profit transfers between campuses within the UK.

London campuses may serve as an alternative to opening an international branch campus—or as a stepping-stone toward branch campus development abroad, in which experiences and models of working with (commercial) partners can be developed:

> Our first [branch campus] experience was in London. With this particular decision, we actually went with a partner who was not a university but was operating in the HE [higher education] sector; it's a private institution which is operating in the HE sector. And they provided the buildings, we provided the degree programs. We cotaught, so we both taught in the programs, and we developed quite a lot of experiences over these last four years with that type of model. (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor)

Learning and adapting to collaborate with commercial actors, in the above case a for-profit education provider, may increase marketization of the public higher education sector that enables further academic entrepreneurialism and may enable the institutions' future geographic expansion to overseas markets.

Temporary Stabilizations: Financial and Reputational Risks

> There are some horror stories out there that we kind of pick up on [...] There are many universities who have gone on very, very ambitious schemes and establishing big campuses very expensively. And we feel from the intelligence we pick up, that quite a few of them do not make any money. And quite a few of them have actually cost the universities significant sums of money. (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor)

Most respondents are aware of the significant risks that investments into international branch campuses entail. A number of the UK's international branch campuses have closed again (see Table 1): Aberystwyth University's and University of Wolverhampton's campuses in Mauritius, De Montfort University's campus in South

[14] Introducing graduates' earnings as a measurement of the TEF (a teaching quality assessment for universities in England) reflects the wage differences in local labor markets in the UK, effectively ranking universities' locations within these uneven labor markets (Baker 2019).

Africa, and University College London's campus in Australia. University College London's other campus in Qatar closed in 2020. Other institutions, while still continuing their international branch campuses, have incurred high operating deficits for their overseas ventures, as shown in their annual financial statements (e.g., University of Reading 2018). Moreover, four London-based domestic branch campuses have again closed, with another one set to close in 2021 (see Table 2).

Higher education scholars have argued that international branch[15] campus development is an inherently risky activity that often involves sizeable investments of time and financial resources in noncore activities and constitutes a "high-risk growth strategy and unsuccessful ventures can result in huge financial losses and reputational consequences" (Wilkins and Huisman 2012, 628; see also Altbach 2010). Branch campuses, paradoxically set up to increase financial revenues and reputation, carry substantial financial and reputational risks, which, like other spatial fixes, only enable temporary stabilizations for the English higher education sector. Devised by individual actors as a survival strategy in a competitive and volatile marketized environment, the underlying contradictions inherent in capitalist higher education systems are not overcome.

A trade-off between financial and reputational risks exists for institutions embarking on branch campus development, which depends on the governance arrangement of the campus: if the university invests in a fully owned campus and controls all operations, financial risks are higher, but the loss of (quality) control is diminished, whereas in models where the university is partnering with another institution and only delivers the curriculum and quality assurance, but is not engaged in facilities management, recruitment, or teaching, financial risks are much lower.

In international branch campuses run in collaboration with local partners, the UK universities' prime task is the development of the curriculum and safeguarding its standards. Large reputational risks loom in case the quality of degrees awarded abroad (using the brand name of the university often without any indication to the place of study where these were attained) is considered to be too low. Poor quality degrees may "dilute the brand" (Interview Education Consultant). The staff seconded from the UK to the branch campuses in these models are thus not *flying faculty* to teach courses but managers whose primary responsibility is quality assurance. Universities introduce metrics and formulas and organize procedures such as double-checks by UK-based staff (Interview Pro-Vice Chancellor). Concerns over lower quality have been raised against international branch campuses but also in relation to domestic branch campuses in London. The UK's Quality Assurance Agency found that quality risks are higher if programs are franchised to business partners, employ nonuniversity teaching staff and part-timers, or fail to invest in sufficiently high quality infrastructure (Quality Assurance Agency 2014).

Reputational risks exist beyond narrowly defined criteria of standards and procedures safeguarding the quality of degrees. They also concern thorny political issues over academic freedom, given that most international branch campuses are situated in (and many have been established with financial aid from) nondemocratic governments with lower scores on academic freedom indexes. Questions of censorship, political interference, or human rights abuses have been voiced by faculty, students, and the

[15] The fact that the places of actual study are not mentioned on most offshore degree certificates is an interesting example of how value is socially constructed not simply by associations with positive places elsewhere (e.g., the UK, London) but also involves the active dissociation from the very places of study (e.g., Malaysia) (Ibert et al. 2019).

media against universities operating international branch campuses in countries such as Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, China, or Singapore, which are major destinations for offshore campuses. Negative press may taint the institutions' reputation for students and faculty in the home market.

Branch campus development thus does not offer a stable solution to the financial problems of English universities. Instead, higher education institutions acting under pressure may enter a downward spiral, since the risks are unevenly distributed and are likely to adversely affect nonelite institutions from economically disadvantaged cities and regions. Moreover, the symbolic fix is tenuous. As UK universities are essentially trying to mobilize a *British brand* of education, the question to what extent it can actually credibly be considered British once it becomes excessively internationalized and stretched is an open question—when degrees are delivered with only limited connection to the home campus or when students from key markets, most importantly China, constitute the overwhelming majority within select subjects in the UK. Instead of a solution, geographic expansion and investment in the built environment at best constitutes a *temporary stabilization* and at worst leads to increased financial difficulties for universities, potentially heightening sociospatial inequalities.

The above discussion has shown how universities have deployed branch campuses as territorial and symbolic fixes in challenging market situations. More recently, two acute crisis situations affect British higher education institutions that corroborate how branch campuses can be strategized as flexible tools: the uncertainty around the UK's exit from the EU (Brexit) and the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas elite research institutions, like the University of Oxford, remained so far conspicuously absent as operators of international branch campuses, this situation is changing now. As Brexit will set the UK outside of the European Research Area, research-intensive universities may lose access to EU research funding. First analysis suggests that some UK institutions aim to reembed themselves in EU territory as an *insurance policy* (Kleibert 2020) against different potential income losses, both in form of tuition fees by European students and EU research funding. The University of Oxford's new physical presence in Berlin is set up with the aim of securing post-Brexit access to European Research Council funding, which shows exactly how branch campuses have become a flexible spatial technology that is used precisely to circumvent territorial regulations through spatial relocation. This constitutes a territorial fix par excellence.

Finally, the mobility restrictions imposed following the Covid-19 pandemic have caused a yet more urgent sense of crisis that affects higher education institutions in internationalized and marketized higher education sectors. It remains an open question whether in the current situation, existing (international) branch campuses are mobilized as fixes that flexibilize teaching locations and thus enable *business continuity* through shifting teaching to countries of international students' origin or third countries with lower infection rates and/or less restrictions on inward student mobility and face-to-face class interactions.

Conclusions

This article started with the broader question of how universities use internationalization as a strategy in the face of general trends of neoliberalization and marketization of higher education in the UK. It provided novel understandings for the motivations for branch campus development abroad and within the UK as *related* strategies and systematically empirically mapped the phenomenon. Decision-makers at universities have employed territorial and symbolic fixes in an attempt to overcome national

regulations and market limitations by de-territorializing themselves from the local and domestic contexts and reterritorializing themselves materially and discursively in places that promise reputational gains, which may translate to economic benefits. These strategies, like all fixes serve as only temporary solutions to crises and may, in some instances, even increase financial pressures in the long run.

This economic geographic inquiry into the spatial strategies of universities complements work that has focused on the macrolevel restructurings and the predominant focus on the market making in higher education through *policy* making, largely ignoring the role of universities as active agents in these processes. Beyond the marketized English higher education sector, case studies of branch campus development from different national contexts and different *varieties of capitalism* traditions (e.g., France, Germany) could contribute to understanding *variegated neoliberalism* in globalizing higher education (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Jessop 2017).

Economic geography could gain from further studying the geographies of globalizing higher education beyond classical themes of universities as regional actors enabling innovation, spillovers, and spin-offs (Lawton Smith 2006; Benneworth 2019). The study has shown how higher education institutions as economic actors actively and continuously redraw the map of national and transnational higher education as they aim to exploit spatial differences, creating further spatial differences through their investment decisions. This study's focus on the mesolevel of universities' spatial strategies could be complemented with microlevel analysis to *unblack-box* organizational decision-making on internationalization within universities. How are decisions on marketization and internationalization taken, and who gets enrolled in and is affected by the reorientation toward revenues accruing from commercial overseas subsidiaries? Future research could delve deeper into understanding universities as economic actors, including their role in forging new commercial ventures and partnerships or changing labor conditions, for which economic geographers would be well equipped.

The study contributes theoretically by conceptualizing geographic fixes as constituted by both material and discursive strategies and by addressing the construction of a global education markets from the mesolevel of key economic actors. It provides a different lens from more abstract Cultural Political Economy readings of the transformation toward a knowledge-based economy that focuses on the state (Sum and Jessop 2013; Moisio 2018) by building upon economic geographer Hudson's (2005) seminal work that has made the case for a cultural political economy perspective that sees cultural economy and political economy as *complementary* approaches that can be fruitfully combined in economic geographic research. This implies taking the material and symbolic constructions (including geographies of branding) equally seriously. The advanced conceptualization of both the territorial fix and the symbolic fix as a subset of spatial fixes may be useful for economic geographic studies on marketization processes more broadly.

The distinction between both types of fixes enables uncovering the role regulatory arbitrage and reputational value of places play in the geographies of marketization beyond the higher education sector. For instance, advanced producer service firms may invoke different territorial and symbolic fixes in their decision-making on subsidiary locations and emergent firm networks that span global cities and offshore locations. By theorizing symbolic fixes and focusing on the reputational value of places as part of spatial strategies, we are able to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of space in the construction of segmented, yet relational markets that combine intersecting political economic and cultural economic logics.

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