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Transnational spaces of education as infrastructures of im/mobility

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Abstract

How do transnational education and international student mobilities intersect? Drawing on geographical literatures on knowledge mobilities and migration infrastructures, offshore campuses are conceptualised as infrastructures of im/mobilities, which are simultaneously embedded within global networks and situated within regional migration regimes. Based on qualitative research on offshore campuses in Southeast Asia, I presents a systematic typology of how offshore campuses and international student mobilities intersect. It is shown how mobile universities play a complex and situated role in reconfiguring international student mobilities and how their material and discursive spaces are sites of circulation and containment. By developing an infrastructures perspective that takes universities as brokers and campuses as the sites of brokerage into consideration, the study advances geographical knowledge on globalising education and mobilities.

KEYWORDS

infrastructures, international branch campus, migration, Southeast Asia, student mobilities

1 | INTRODUCTION

A thriving body of work analysing international student mobilities has focused on students' motivations, aspirations, and desires (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Collins et al., 2014; Findlay et al., 2012) and to a lesser extent on the infrastructures, actors, and networks that broker student migration (Beech, 2018; Lindquist et al., 2012; Thieme, 2017). To date, studies have rarely focused on the higher education institutions themselves as actors in enabling or inhibiting specific forms of international mobilities. Emerging work on transnational education, in which education providers deliver cross-border education (including distance education, validation and franchise degrees, and offshore campuses) has equally focused on individual students' motivations, experiences, and social mobility outcomes (Leung & Waters, 2013, 2017; Waters & Leung, 2013, 2017; for a "push-pull" survey, see Wilkins et al., 2012), but a critical gap exists linking the mobilities of higher education institutions and students to understand how they relate to each other (Raghuram, 2013, p. 146).

Do foreign university campuses offer alternatives to physical mobility and thus enable immobility by providing access to international higher education degrees *in situ*? Or are they centres of circulation, which depend on selective inward mobilities and broker outward mobilities through their programmes? To date, there has been no systematic analysis of

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how the cross-border mobilities of institutions (or their degree programmes) *and* of students come together in different types of offshore campuses. Offshore campuses are constituted by a multitude of translocal flows, including international students, fly-in faculty, mobile curricula, ideas, and imaginaries (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018). These institutions are an exemplary global place given that they are translocally networked and constituted through various material and immaterial flows. Simultaneously, they are articulated into local spaces through bricks and mortar infrastructures that both embed them and create distance from other local practices. Following Massey, we can approach these sites with a “global sense of place” and investigate them as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (Massey, 1994, p. 154). They are constituted by various corporeal and imaginary mobilities and immobilities and themselves actively enable different forms of mobility and immobility.

Following work on the “infrastructures of migration” (Lindquist et al., 2012; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), this paper develops a systematic typology to show the complex and situated role of offshore campuses as sites of circulation and containment by focusing on a diversity of higher education actors and institutional arrangements. The study takes a meso-level perspective that focuses on the agency, strategies, and logics of higher education institutions, which are considered key agents in reconfiguring international student mobilities. Key decisions-makers and executives of internationalisation strategies are recognised to be important “mobility managers” who structure and bring into being networks of mobility (Findlay et al., 2005, p. 197). To date, these agents have only received shallow empirical attention.

Methodologically, this paper moves beyond the single-case study approach and draws on extensive qualitative data gathered through observations at campuses and interviews with management staff at offshore campuses in Southeast Asia. Singapore and Malaysia, in particular, have been articulated for a considerable time into international student mobilities and transnational education networks and host a diverse group of foreign education providers, making the region a particularly relevant site to explore these issues.

The paper advances theoretical debates in human geography by developing the notion of offshore campuses as complex “infrastructures of migration,” thus providing a spatialised reading of the infrastructures as sites and focusing on the previously rather neglected role of higher education institutions as migration brokers. Drawing on migration research and geographical studies on transnational education, I conceptualise campuses as infrastructures of im/mobility. The systematic framework of how different types of “knowledge mobilities” interact enables us to arrive at more generalisable knowledge and more nuanced understandings beyond individual case studies. Focusing on infrastructures enables us to cast a different view on students’ international (im)mobility decisions as well as higher education institutions’ rationales for operating offshore campuses. Relying on a conceptualisation of mobility and immobility as related concepts, this study moreover presents a grounded perspective of the conflicts and tensions inherent in state strategies based on circulations, including international students and education providers, while simultaneously containing inward migration.

The next section theorises knowledge mobilities by reviewing literature on international student mobilities and on universities as mobile actors to conceptualise offshore campuses as infrastructures of im/mobility. These sites are situated within countries’ economic strategies for developing international education hubs and migration regimes. Following an explanation on methodology, I develop a typology based on empirical research for understanding how offshore campuses enable mobilities and immobilities of students. The conclusion elaborates on the contributions of a geographic perspective on knowledge mobilities and migration and develops a research agenda for further geographic scholarship on globalising higher education.

2 | INFRASTRUCTURES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IM/MOBILITY

2.1 | Theorising knowledge mobilities

Higher education institutions are deeply embedded in various types of knowledge mobilities, including mobilities of researchers, students, objects, and ideas (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018; Jöns et al., 2017; Raghuram, 2013). Most empirical studies of knowledge mobilities focus on the corporeal mobilities of students across national borders. The burgeoning international student mobility literature primarily engages with the perspective of students and their motivations for choosing to become mobile (e.g., Brooks & Waters, 2011; Collins et al., 2014; Findlay et al., 2012). While constituting a relevant contribution to our knowledge, the narrow focus obscures other significant issues. First, the focus on students as key actors has traditionally neglected the supporting infrastructures of mobility, including supportive actors in the “migration industry” of higher education (Beech, 2018). Second, the focus on (international) mobilities, in parallel with a broader mobilities turn in the social sciences, has analytically privileged mobilities at the expense of immobilities

(Cheng, 2018). The latter are often perceived as inferior or deficient, a problem that could be addressed with a relational and non-normative understanding of mobilities and immobilities (Breines et al., 2019; Finn & Holton, 2019). Third, international degrees are constituted by more than the (im)mobilities of students, as higher education institutions themselves have become increasingly mobile actors offering their degrees transnationally through partnership agreements or offshore campuses abroad (C-BERT, 2017; Gunter & Raghuram, 2018; Kosmützky, 2018).

In this paper, the term “mobilities” is largely used in line with the literature on international student mobilities, which is generally synonymous with student “migration,” but is slightly more open-ended as it encompasses both short- and longer-term cross-border mobilities of students (King & Raghuram, 2013, p. 129). Cross-border geographic mobilities are the focus of this study, at the expense of other conceptualisations of mobilities.¹ Relatedly, “immobility” characterises students who remain within their home country of study but enrol in transnational education. “Transnational education” refers to the delivery of a higher education institutions’ programme in another country, following the definition generally used by both stakeholders and academics. A more precise term for transnational education is “international programme and provider mobility,” which to date has found less traction among stakeholders who continue to use the term transnational education (Knight & McNamara, 2017). It is thus the university itself (or its curriculum) that travels and becomes mobile, rather than students or staff engaging in cross-border mobility.² Transnational education takes various shapes, including distance learning, franchised or validated degrees, or the establishment of offshore campuses.

There is no single definition for “offshore campuses” or international branch campuses (Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011). Both terms are used interchangeably in this paper to signify physical presences of higher education institutions abroad that provide academic degree programmes using the name of the home institution potentially in collaboration with business and/or academic partners. In theory, then, transnational education enables foreign higher education institutions to offer foreign degree programmes locally, and are generally (at least implicitly) understood to constitute an alternative to the physical international mobility of students and enabling a “choice for immobility” (see Breines et al., 2019).

Knowledge mobilities are embedded within uneven geographies of higher education and are affected by contemporary and inherited (im)mobilities. They are situated within stratified “reputational geographies” of rankings and hierarchies of elite and “world-class” institutions (Findlay et al., 2012; Jöns & Hoyler, 2013), geographic imaginaries (Beech, 2014; Collins, 2013; Raghuram, 2013), and (neo)colonialism and uneven power relations in international education (Leung & Waters, 2017; Phan, 2017; Sidhu, 2006; Siltaoja et al., 2019).

2.2 | Transnational education between circulation and containment

This section reviews existing literature on how transnational education relates to circulations and containment of international student mobilities. The management literature on international business schools and their networked models of campus development elevates ideas of global circulations. Previous research has shown how the geographies of business schools and international financial centres, or global cities, are closely related (Hall, 2008, 2011; Olds, 2007). The most prestigious business schools tend to offer high-cost programmes enabling the reproduction of class difference. Moreover, “global” business schools are conspicuous sites for reproducing the transnational capitalist class, which consists of mobile individuals with cultural capital acting as “globalising professionals” (Sklair, 2001). Through a network of campuses in key cities, students are prepared for expatriate lifestyles. Highly ranked, often private, education providers – for instance, New York University with its campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai – flaunt their diversity (measured in terms of number of student nationalities) and the integrated network structures of their campus as “global models” with “seamless mobilities” (Hawawini, 2016; see also Olds, 2007, p. 971). Only very few institutions operate globally integrated networks of campuses, but these “global models” are highly visible in the literature, also because the management executives of these schools actively promote the models and differentiate themselves from what they consider shallower forms of internationalisation (Hawawini, 2016). These ideas of globally operating institutions with “seamless mobility” shape the aspirations and branding of most higher education institutions.

In contrast to these mobilities-focused accounts from the field of higher education management and economic geography, much critical geographic and social-scientific research on transnational education has focused on forms of immobility that characterise the realities for many students enrolled in franchised transnational education degrees. Authors in this field “deliberately focus on the immobile ‘international’ student” (Waters & Leung, 2013, p. 607). In their study on British degrees delivered in Hong Kong, Waters and Leung (2013) coin the term “immobile transnationalism” to refer to the experiences of domestic students studying for degrees awarded by British higher education institutions, which

involve no travel and are taught entirely in Hong Kong. Much theorisation has been based on the specific case of British transnational education in Hong Kong (Leung & Waters, 2013, 2017; Waters & Leung, 2013, 2017) and further work has followed the direction and analysed in-depth the experiences and (re)negotiations of immobility, mediocrity, and limited acquisition of cultural capital in outsourced, often “second-choice” programmes by students enrolled in foreign-branded but locally awarded degrees in Singapore (Cheng, 2018) and Vietnam (Phan, 2017).

These rather “siloed” accounts of, on the one hand, globalising universities’ ubiquitous circulation and, on the other hand, transnationally delivered degrees as alternatives to physical mobility leave us with a rather incomplete understanding of mobile higher education providers and programmes and their relation to cross-border student (im)mobilities. Between binary understandings of circulations or containment lie a number of other possible ways offshore campuses can act, for instance, as selective brokers of international student mobilities, which will be explored using a broad-ranging sample of different institutional arrangements and geographical origins of universities delivering their degrees transnationally. The strategies of higher education institutions are intimately linked to their ability to create economic value and reap financial rewards by promising mobilities to students. Universities’ role as economic actors with particular business models and value propositions that facilitate particular forms of im/mobility are the subject of this analysis.

2.3 | Embedded infrastructures of im/mobility in education hubs

Educational scholars investigating international mobilities of students have argued that students’ decision to study for a degree abroad may not constitute a single movement in reaction to push- or pull-factors and is instead influenced by spatial imaginaries, social networks, and intermediaries (Collins, 2013). Educational agents (recruiting international students through a commission-based system) are the most visible intermediaries or brokers of higher education mobilities (Thieme, 2017), but higher education institutions themselves can act as mobility brokers. Following an intervention in the field of migration studies that takes into view the “infrastructures of migration” (Lindquist et al., 2012), educational scholars have argued that “mobility is shaped not only by student ‘choice’ but also by the social and institutional networks within which students circulate” (Collins, 2013, p. 480) and have conceptualised the infrastructures of student mobility as the “relatively stable social and institutional connections that support or enable student mobility.”

In this paper I argue that the actors (higher education institutions) and infrastructures (campuses as physical sites) are fundamental components in the enabling and channelling of student migration. Building on the work of Lindquist et al. (2012, p. 10), I employ the perspective of infrastructures and focus on how mobility is brokered, enabled, and organised, to overcome a methodological bias that persists in higher education research similarly as in migration research: “namely the neglect of the infrastructure of migration, which is an ‘artefact of methodologies’ that has focused on migrants, their families and communities, rather than entrepreneurs and brokers.” Xiang and Lindquist have used the term “migration infrastructure” to connote “the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. 124). They divide infrastructures into five dimensions: commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian, and social. Here, I add to this an explicit focus on the role of space and physical infrastructures. Expanding the view from particular actors, the brokers, to exploring specific sites of brokerage, I adopt the framework to explore campuses through which mobilities are (re)negotiated. I analytically develop the notion of infrastructures of im/mobility to capture the complex role of offshore campuses for international student mobilities. The idea that we should investigate infrastructures of immobility as well as mobility is convincingly argued by Breines et al. (2019) in a case study on online distance education in Africa. They show how the delivery of online distance education can be understood “as infrastructures that enable immobility” (Breines et al., 2019, p. 485).

The role of institutions as infrastructures of im/mobility is embedded within the migration regimes of the state that enable or restrict international student mobilities. Changing migration policies in higher education, for instance post-study work visa regulations, affect international student mobilities (Beech, 2018; Geddie, 2015; Riaño et al., 2018). International students are part of segmented migration regimes that classify “wanted” and “unwanted” bodies. In Singapore, differential regulation bifurcated around “skills” enables the attraction and inclusion of mainly Western, highly skilled “expatriates” (Beaverstock, 2002; Cranston, 2017), while marginalising “unskilled” contract workers (Yeoh, 2006). Singapore’s migration policies are related to economic imaginaries of a knowledge-based economy and its labour needs. Thus, migration policies are affected by changes in economic visions of the countries hosting offshore campuses. Moreover, international student mobilities may occur in connection with earlier migration flows, existing diaspora, or ethnic minority groups in a country and are related to national educational systems, their exclusionary mechanisms, and “cultures of migration” (for Malaysia, see Koh, 2017; Sidhu, 2006).

Transnational education is usually strongly facilitated by host states and is embedded in national education systems and economic development strategies, often framed as strategies for the development of so-called international education hubs (Knight, 2014), which are based on attracting both internationally mobile universities and students. Offshore campuses are, like domestic institutions in East Asia, embedded within economic and biopolitical strategies of circulation and containment, which enrol the material and discursive spaces of the university campus (Sidhu et al., 2016, p. 1494). In Singapore, the government has incentivised the setting up of foreign branch campuses with the development of its “Global Schoolhouse” policy starting in 2002 (Collins et al., 2014; Olds, 2007; Olds & Thrift, 2005; Sidhu et al., 2011). The policy has since been discontinued, but Singapore continues to attract foreign providers of higher education. Similarly, neighbouring Malaysia has set out to become an international education hub (Mok, 2011). These strategies involve multiple policy fields, including economy and trade policy (e.g., the vital role played by the Economic Development Board in Singapore), education, and immigration, which may have different, and potentially conflicting, goals. A geographic lens enables the combination of different geographical streams of literature on globalising higher education markets, the geographies of international students, and migration regimes, while providing grounded empirical work that stays attuned to the contextualised nature of how higher education institutions are constitutive of infrastructures of im/mobility.

3 | METHODOLOGY

The meso-level study of offshore campuses as infrastructures of im/mobility follows Lindquist et al. (2012) push for a new methodology in migration research. In contrast to much research on migration and transnational education that focuses on the individual motivations, aspirations, and strategies of youth and their families, I focus on the “supply” side of higher education institutions and the role these institutions play in re-configuring international student mobilities and immobilities in Singapore and Malaysia. The two countries were chosen as research sites for a number of reasons. First, they are home to a large number of offshore campuses, which are concentrated in only a few countries globally (C-BERT, 2017; Kosmützky, 2018). Second, transnational education is delivered from a variety of providers.³ Third, offshore campuses have existed for a considerable period of time, thus providing a fertile ground from where to conceptualise how higher education institutions relate to international mobilities. Table 1 shows all offshore campuses in Singapore (19) and Malaysia (16). The term “offshore campus” here connotes all physical presences of foreign higher education institutions that engage in offering higher education programmes abroad. The size of these campuses differ. Most institutions offer only specialised programmes rather than exporting all degrees from the home campus; the student numbers at each campus range from less than 30 students to a maximum of 5,000 students.

All institutions were included in the sample and approached with a request to participate in the study. In total, 26 institutions in Singapore and Malaysia participated, accounting for 80% and 70% of the total sample, respectively. The findings are based on semi-structured, qualitative interviews with senior managers of transnational education operations (including CEOs/COOs, deans, provosts, and managing directors) in Singapore and Malaysia.⁴ In addition to interviews, observation of the offshore campuses as sites were conducted, including guided tours by university personnel and recruitment managers. Campus visits added to a “grounded” experience of transnational education in place, as both the material and the symbolic spaces of university campuses matter for student experiences (Leung & Waters, 2013). The focus was on information, signs, and symbols in relation to the home campus, geographic imaginaries, and advertisements for mobility and circulation. Data, in the form of fieldwork notes, photos, marketing brochures, and flyers, as well as online presence of universities, were collected and evaluated. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed and thematically analysed.

4 | OFFSHORE CAMPUSES AS INFRASTRUCTURES OF IM/MOBILITY

The variety of offshore education providers, modes of investment and delivery, and sending and host country contexts led to a diversity of ways in which mobilities are envisioned to interact with transnational delivery. The two extremes most discussed in the literature are highly mobile individuals enrolling in international Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes and the “immobile” students enrolled in transnational education programmes as a last resort for students unable to enrol in domestic programmes. Together, these form the outer ends of the spectrum along which international student (im)mobilities are entangled with transnational education programmes (as discussed in section 2.2),

TABLE 1 List of offshore campuses in Singapore and Malaysia

| Name of institution | Country of origin |
|---|--------------------------|
| <i>Offshore campuses in Singapore</i> | |
| Curtin Singapore | Australia |
| Murdoch University Singapore | Australia |
| James Cook University Singapore | Australia |
| SP Jain Center of Management Singapore Campus | Australia |
| ESSEC Asia-Pacific | France |
| INSEAD Asia Campus | Germany |
| Technical University of Munich Asia | Germany |
| Trinity College Dublin Singapore | Ireland |
| SIT-Massey University | New Zealand |
| École Hôtelière de Lausanne (to open in 2021) | Switzerland |
| Newcastle University Singapore | United Kingdom |
| Glasgow School of Art Singapore | United Kingdom |
| University of Glasgow Singapore | United Kingdom |
| Manchester Business School, Singapore | United Kingdom |
| Liverpool University-SIT, Singapore | United Kingdom |
| DigiPen Institute of Technology Singapore | USA |
| The Culinary Institute of America, Singapore | USA |
| Yale–NUS College | USA |
| Duke–NUS Medical School | USA |
| <i>Offshore campuses in Malaysia</i> | |
| Curtin University Malaysia | Australia |
| Monash University Malaysia | Australia |
| University of Wollongong | Australia |
| Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus | Australia |
| Xiamen University Malaysia | China |
| Manipal International University | India |
| Melaka Manipal Medical College | India |
| RCSI–UCD Malaysia Campus | Ireland |
| Raffles University | Singapore |
| Heriot-Watt University Malaysia | United Kingdom |
| Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia | United Kingdom |
| University of Nottingham, Malaysia | United Kingdom |
| University of Reading Malaysia | United Kingdom |
| University of Southampton Malaysia | United Kingdom |
| International University of Malaya–Wales | United Kingdom |
| Asia School of Business (by MIT Sloan School of Business) | USA |

Source: Author's fieldwork

between which lie a currently underappreciated diversity of institutional set-ups that entice different forms of short- and long-term and regional and overseas inward and outward student mobilities.

Figure 1 shows a typology of how offshore campuses constitute infrastructures of mobility and immobility. First, offshore campuses can tap into existing mobilities and act simply as sites of attracting internationally mobile students, similar to domestic institutions, thus tapping into already mobile youth. Second, they can be mobility machines that broker international mobilities of students in different ways: (a) as networked centres that provide a curriculum across

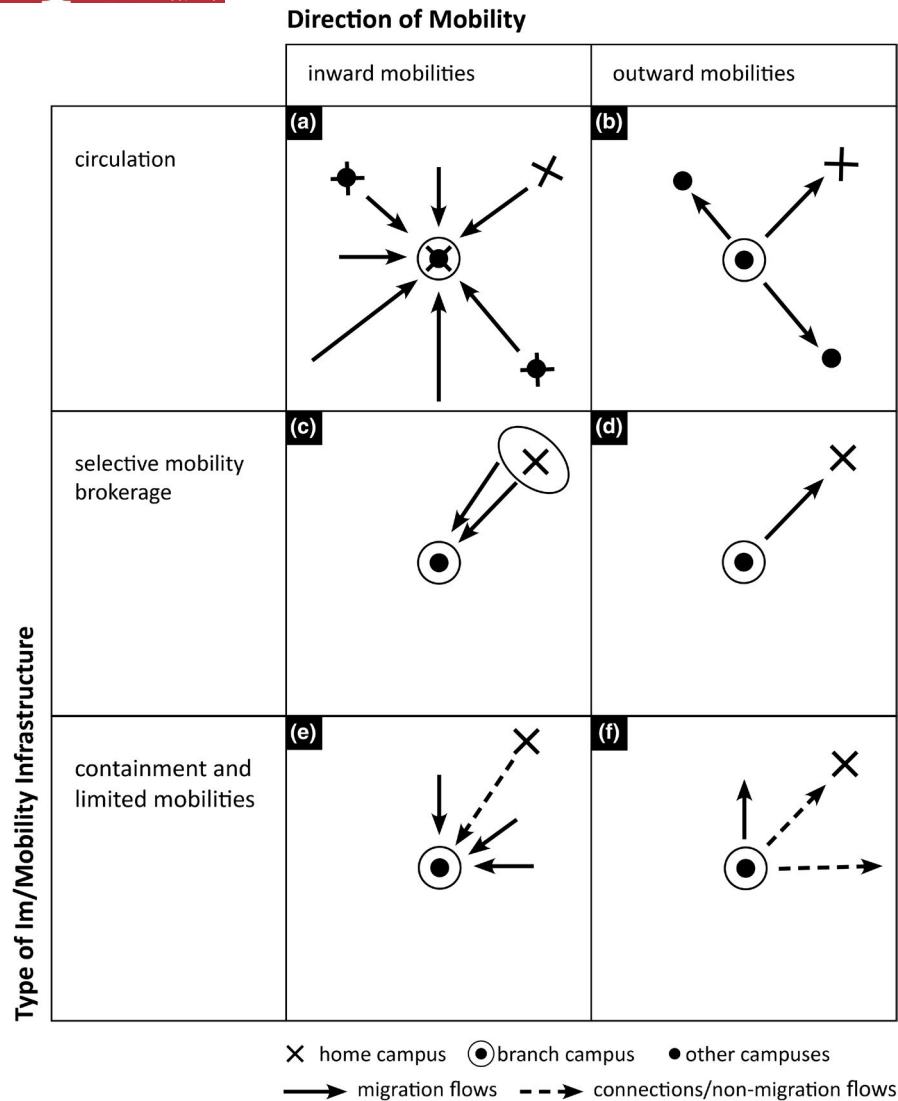


FIGURE 1 Typologies of offshore campuses and international student mobilities

campuses, (b) as study abroad centres and cultural exposure sites for home campus populations, (c) as feeder systems that transfer students through articulation arrangements to the home campus, (d) as hubs for intra-regional mobility, and (e) as entry points for labour migration. Finally, branch campuses can (f) offer an alternative to international student mobility for “immobile” students or groups excluded from entry into domestic education programmes. These diverse roles as infrastructures of im/mobility are discussed empirically in the following.

4.1 | Infrastructures of circulation

Integrated, globally networked campuses that enable “seamless mobility” are the aspirational model for many higher education institutions setting up offshore campuses and is central to their marketing. This model posits an international branch campus as a transnational space that attracts a diverse group of international students from around the world. Renowned international business schools and private universities for this reason reject the term “branch campus” and aim to realise this vision by integrating their offshore campuses into a singular, multi-sited “global” university. New York University in Abu Dhabi, for instance, issued a press release proudly announcing that its most recent intake consists of 84 nationalities and the total student population on campus represents 120 countries (NYU Abu Dhabi, 2018). A diverse international student body here is understood as the number of nationalities, which are carefully curated through recruitment and selection procedures, including scholarships.

Creating a transnational campus through inward mobility of international students from different nationalities is the declared strategy of a European business school in Singapore. This is reflected in the description of their student profile: “experienced very international executives or upcoming executives that speak at least two or three languages, come from more than 100 countries – and that’s something that we are very proud of because of the diversity of our classrooms” (Interview with Executive Director, SG). The president at the offshore campus of a business school in Malaysia claims that:

Our students come from over 30 different countries from all continents around the world [...] 30% are Malaysian, 70% non-Malaysian. Of the non-Malaysians maybe another 20% are Asian. It’s global in the sense that we have numerous countries in Asia represented, but also numerous countries in North America, South America, Europe and Africa. (Interview with President, MY)

Such statements reflect how the value proposition of the degrees as “global” is intimately connected to the number of nationalities that can be enticed to the campus. In these cases, the infrastructural logics of inward and outward international student mobility are central to the operation of offshore campuses. The cost of international MBA programmes tends to be high and address economic elites. High tuition fees can also signal quality in higher education, given that it is a positional market,⁵ but can also be justified by the high operating costs of the programme:

Our tuition rates are dramatically higher than the other schools in the country, and our program is the more expensive program to run in the sense that we fly a lot of [our] faculty in to teach. We bring all of our students to [home campus] every year for classes, and all of our students every semester work on actual learning projects somewhere in the region, where they travel and live in the countries for periods of time working on projects. (Interview with President, MY)

Branch campuses of international business schools thus not only draw on recruiting inwardly mobile students, they also act as infrastructures of mobility as they enable and require longer and shorter-term international student mobilities throughout the programme. Degrees offered at multiple campuses enable students to travel and receive their degree through studying across different campuses, where universities aim to provide “seamless mobility within the network” (Hawawini, 2016, pp. 183–4). The CEO of a business schools’ offshore campus in Singapore explains that the campus is:

Unlike other universities where you go to the university for four years and you stay in the same place, you eat the same food, you stay in the same dormitory. Here at [our university] you have to travel. It’s a different kind of student that we’re looking for. (Interview with CEO, SG)

Students in these models are expected to be inter-continently mobile and spend extended periods for study in different locations. The quote shows how students’ ability to be mobile is a precondition for recruitment. The time students spend abroad and the level of engagement differs substantially per programme. The “Global Part-Time MBA” of the University of Manchester, for instance, encompasses 16 days of tuition in the first year and 13 days of tuition in the second year (taught in blocks of three to six days) either in Manchester or at one of the universities’ offshore centres in Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Dubai, and Sao Paulo. Up to six nights of hotel accommodation at the foreign sites are covered by their tuition fees (University of Manchester, 2018, pp. 26–7). The short-term circulations of three to six days across a range of metropolises is a fast-paced mobility across sites that exudes the excitement and limited local engagement of tourism.

Corroborating this idea, touristic amenities and warm weather are part of the motivation attracting international students to their programme, argues a respondent from Singapore. The Singapore-based programme is particularly sought after during the European winter months, as the course structure enables students to move freely between campuses. Only very few students do not take courses at different campuses, usually due to care work and other obligations that make them “immobile.” These individuals do not comply with the idea of constant mobility and have been given a nickname: “We have a term for them: the ‘lifers.’ These are the people who never cross campus. They took all their courses in the same campus that they started and to finish. That’s very few percentages. Everybody does cross” (Interview with Executive Director, SG). Mobile lifestyles are thus both a precondition for enrolment in networked branch campuses but are also part of the training, imbuing students with cultural capital of the transnational capitalist class.

Students already become acquainted with an expatriate lifestyle that makes them internationally mobile between key (financial) cities, but remain disembedded from “local” social spaces (see Beaverstock, 2002; Hall, 2008, 2011).

Australian universities' offshore campuses in Singapore receive a few European exchange students, who prefer to enrol in a "Western" institution rather than a domestic institution to cushion their study-abroad experience.

4.2 | Infrastructures of selective mobility brokerage

Several higher education institutions have built their business models around enabling selective mobilities between the home campus and their offshore campus. Usually these either broker inward mobilities to or outward mobilities from the offshore campus. Brokering inward international student mobilities from the home campus offers students the ability to study abroad without leaving their higher education institutions, offering an environment for students that minimises the interaction of students with local institutions and domestic students. Inter-campus exchange programmes enable students to swap campuses while facing fewer challenges of "academic adjustments" and "culture shock" than other study-abroad students (Normand-Marconnet, 2015). The model is popular with US-American universities in Europe, even in English-language contexts. For instance, the Embassy of the USA in London (2010) lists 32 Study Abroad Centres of US universities and colleges operating in London alone, which draw almost exclusively from their home campus student body.

In Singapore, some branch campuses also attract primarily students from the universities' country of origin, some of whom complete their entire degrees at offshore campuses. A French business school primarily recruits French students, despite conducting classes in English:

That's one way of internationalisation. You send your French kids [...] and you get them exposed to a foreign country, foreign culture for a few months with, at the start, professors from the French campus applying to teach here. It still remains a very French environment. (Interview with Managing Director, SG)

Although students' physical mobility is enhanced through these programmes, as circulation between home and offshore campus are facilitated also for students who would not otherwise have considered studying abroad, they remain culturally strongly linked to their country of origin on campus. For the higher education institutions, the offshore campus constitutes a "real asset" for recruitment in the home market, where the facilitated international student mobility enables a competitive advantage (Interview with Managing Director, SG).

The first Chinese offshore campus, founded in 2016, similarly is perceived to position itself as strongly connected to knowledge mobilities from mainland China. The Vice-President of a rival institution argues, not without admiration, "Everything is from China. They bring the professors, they bring the leadership, they bring the students and have them educated here. It's a very different business model" (Interview with Vice Chancellor, MY). The campus clearly is tied into selective transnational knowledge mobilities involving students, faculty, objects, and ideas between China and a physical site in Malaysia, which also has geopolitical dimensions in the multi-ethnic state of Malaysia.

Although the focus on recruitment from the country of origin of the higher education provider may be a financially viable (or even highly profitable) endeavour, the aspiration for most is to turn themselves into "global campuses." Most universities aim to attract more international students, meaning beyond those of their country of origin. This is exemplified in the statement by the manager of an Indian offshore campus:

We would like to be an international university that attracts a diversity of the population, racially, demographically, financially, and so forth. That's what we would like to be. I think what we really are is we're still a pretty Indian university. We've been trying very hard to move away from this concept of an Indian university. [...] We have historically drawn Indian students and it's only been in the last, let's say, two to three years that we have tried to move away from that mindset and really tried to become an international university. (Interview with Vice Chancellor, MY)

Often a gap between the advertised mobilities and experienced mobilities at offshore campuses exists, which higher education managers are very much aware of and struggle to narrow. When asked about the university's website advertisement that suggests the offshore campus is "a launchpad to the world," the director of the campus argues that the mobility between campuses is actually low, listing a number of challenges: "That hasn't materialised. It's very difficult to do. Different curriculum, different expectations, different academic quality, different academic calendars" (Interview with Vice Chancellor, MY). The French institution similarly aims to internationalise through hiring Chinese and Indian professors and tries to recruit

students from Asia. However, recruitment within Asia proves to be more difficult than anticipated, since the French institution does not have the same reputational capital in the region as at home (Interview with Managing Director, SG). While the proclaimed institutional goal of higher education institutions is almost always an institution comprised of different student nationalities, which also translates to reputational advantage of being an international university, several institutions find moving beyond inward student mobilities from the home countries challenging.

Offshore campuses' role as aggressive brokers of outward international student mobilities is particularly visible in strategies of universities from the United Kingdom, in cases where the transfer of students to the universities' home campus lies at the heart of their financial models. In so-called "2+2" or "2+1" articulation arrangements, the branch campus acts as a feeder system for the home campus, where the first one or two years are spent at the offshore campus and then the final years are spent at the institution's home campus. These are forms of obligated mobility, as the degree can only be completed through a transfer to the home campus. UK-based higher education providers in particular follow this model and set up campuses in regions that constitute primary "markets" for international student mobility to the UK, such as China and Malaysia. According to recent figures, 16 percent of international students studying in the UK started their degree at an offshore provider, showing that programmes delivered transnationally present an important pathway for "onshore" education (British Council, 2020, p. 8).

The strategy is not to simply teach international students in their respective home countries to limit inward student migration to the UK, but instead to broaden the market of students who can be recruited to the UK for a shorter period of time. The offerings target a market of students who want to receive a British degree but are not (yet) willing to move to the UK. Offshore campuses enable brokerage by providing students with a preparatory programme within their home countries that connects to a degree in the institution's home campus in the UK. Higher education institutions are able to broaden their market and recruit students just below the threshold of being able to afford an entire degree abroad. The relatively lower costs are one of the advantages that higher education institutions actively market on their websites:

Our undergraduate degree courses in Engineering allow you to study for two years at our safe and modern campus in Iskandar Puteri, Johor, and two years in Southampton, UK, for 60% of the cost of studying in the UK alone. (University of Southampton, 2019)

The University of Liverpool's income from international students has risen substantially as the number of students increased through the "pathway programme" of the Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University (XJTLU) campus in China, which mobilises a steady stream of international fee-paying students to the UK. According to HESA data for the year 2017–18, the University of Liverpool had close to 5,000 Chinese students enrolled at its home campus, the second highest Chinese student population of any university in the UK (HESA, 2019).

The financial benefits of arrangements that convert students from the offshore campus after an initial year or two to international students in the UK are substantial. Even if students are not obliged to complete their degrees at the home campus, the existence of an offshore campus may encourage students to spend at least one term at the home campus. Beyond direct brokerage, offshore campuses can imaginatively stimulate the desires for international mobility through symbolic linkages to the home campus and country. Inside the visited offshore campuses, advertisements for "study abroad" are prevalent. Moreover, ubiquitous corporate marketing of university logos and design is generally accompanied by stylised maps indicating locations of campuses and multi time-zone clocks (familiar in multinational corporations' offices). These artefacts constitute a symbolic linking of space (through arrows functioning as imaginary bridges linking home and branch location on maps) and time (by displaying the current time at home campus and offshore campus). The signs and symbols shape geographic imaginaries and may foster students' "desire to become in circulation" (Collins et al., 2014, p. 673). The identity as a student of a geographically distant entity may over time develop into a desire and longing to migrate to the "home" campus.

Offshore campuses can thus function as a strategic asset and infrastructure to make 'immobile' students mobile. Universities often financially profit from brokering international student mobilities. To facilitate the transfer of international students to the home campus, universities rely upon dedicated International Offices for visa assistance and related services.

4.3 | Infrastructures of limited mobilities and containment

Beyond brokering intercontinental bilateral international student mobilities between higher education's countries of origin and host countries, a third type of offshore campus is based on inward mobilities from third-country students from within

the broader geographic region. These offshore campuses show the complex roles offshore campuses can take as infrastructures of im/mobility, since they are at once based on international student mobilities across more limited geographic (and often cultural) distances and present alternatives to transcontinental mobilities to the home campuses of (primarily Western) higher education institutions.

One example is the offshore campus of a European university in Singapore. Its managing director reveals that “99% of our students in the master’s programmes are not from Singapore” but come primarily from India and China. These are students who would not normally consider studying at the higher education institutions’ home campus in Europe but are mobile within the region (Interview, Director, SG). In this specific example, recruitment to the Singaporean campus is organised through recruitment agents in China and India. These two countries are the largest markets for international students and several respondents explain that the motivation to operate a campus in Singapore or Malaysia is based on the idea that they are located “in a region of three billion people.” A larger scale catchment area beyond domestic students is strategically envisioned by offshore campus providers, which rely on (long-established) intra-Asian mobilities (see Collins, 2013). Beyond Southeast Asia, similar patterns of regional education mobilities were analysed in a recent study on offshore campuses in South Africa, showing how international students at offshore campuses largely stemmed from within the South African Development Community (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018).

At one offshore campus international students have to clock their physical presence on campus using a student-card-and-finger-print-reading machine. International students failing to clock in for more than three hours a day on campus may lose their visa, which is seen with great concern by the expatriate management of the campus:

We have a committee that looks at the records on a very regular basis, because the other thing is, if you fall below a certain threshold, you are not allowed to sit your final assessment. If you’re an international student, that means you’ve failed, also means you’ve breached your visa requirements to attend, so you could end up being deported. This is very serious stuff. (Interview with President, SG)

While attendance records are kept in many universities to discipline students, this device is not recording the attendance of classes (which are registered in addition) but simply the physical presence on the campus, thus it seems related to concerns about labour migration. These specific devices are not in operation at the universities’ home campus but present a biopolitical technology of the Singaporean state stationed on campus, used as a technique for producing desirable subjects and policing unwanted behaviour. It is an example of the complex securitisation of legally-entered temporary immigrants in Singapore taking place beyond the state border in the everyday spaces of *within* the state territory (Loong, 2018).

Singapore’s higher education strategy shifted away from the original goal to attract 150,000 foreign students to an approach that is primarily focused on local labour market needs. The Singaporean government changed its approach to regulate foreign higher education providers through setting up a new regulatory agency, the Council for Private Education (now renamed Committee for Private Education), and the formulation of the Private Education Act in 2009, which severely reduced the number of operators in the sector (Lo, 2017). Now, education providers require EduTrust Certification to be able to recruit international students and are more heavily scrutinised. Mixed with concerns of educational quality and consumer protection are fears of foreign education providers facilitating illegal labour migration through international student recruitment.

Offshore campus managers express concerns about these processes, but find themselves in a weak role to challenge these, as they depend on the goodwill of their host governments in order to operate: “We get audited, if we said that 100% of our students are attending all the time, they would say, ‘clearly, you don’t audit properly,’ and they’d be watching us like hawks” (Interview with President, SG). Despite concerns, offshore campus managers apply the technological tools for assessing attendance, arguing that “it’s just something that you’re aware of, and so it just means that you have to be a really good corporate citizen. You have to understand your landscape” (Interview with President, SG). Being a good corporate citizen also means working towards achieving the strategic goals of the government:

The reason that it’s important is that in order to deliver value for Singapore and to demonstrate to the Singapore government that we are delivering value, then we need to educate students for the local work-force, which means local students. (Interview with Head of Campus, SG)

Offshore campuses’ student profiles and the ratio of domestic and international students are thus shaped not simply by education institutions’ strategies but also are subject to host state economic strategies and embedded within its migration regimes. Beyond having to secure the realisation of value for their mother institution, they are infrastructures tied into

governmental projects that involve tensions of circulation and containment (see Sidhu et al., 2016) and require the production of value for the domestic economy.

In Malaysia, offshore campuses find it challenging to recruit international students to their campuses, given the existing student visa regulations. A respondent from a British university with about 20 per cent international students, who are primarily drawn from the region, explains that the government has:

Been extremely stringent in terms of student visa requirements [...]. In Malaysia, you are only given a one-year visa and your renewal is based on you must ensure that you have 80% attendance in the class, you must ensure that you get a certain passing mark, you must make sure your grades are okay. If not, they will not renew your visa for the second year. You have students who may not have done so well in year one and need to re-sit papers and they get stuck in terms of the renewal of the visa. I have students who had 78% attendance and their visa has been rejected. (Interview with COO, MY)

Even in cases where the legal documents have been acquired, recent developments have contributed to an anxious atmosphere for international students, as there have been “negative reports on international students being detained by the Malaysian government even though they have a student visa recently. I think there’s been some negative publicity on how students have been detained and checked for their visas” (Interview with COO, MY). These experiences expose some of the tensions and contradictions within the ambitions of Singapore and Malaysia to become international education hubs. Whereas the education and economic development departments, above all the Singaporean Economic Development Board, have supported the strategy for attracting inward-migration from students within the larger region, home office departments and existing immigration regulations are not necessarily supporting these strategies. Offshore campuses are, similar to internationalising higher education institutions at large, sites within which the contradictory policies around “student-migrants” (Robertson, 2013) play out as spaces enabling limited circulations as well as containment of international students (Sidhu et al., 2016).

Students’ decision to study for a degree abroad may be connected to ambitions of permanent residency in another country (Robertson, 2013). An Australian higher education institution’s campus manager in Singapore explains that the opportunities for their international students (from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Thailand, and Myanmar) to migrate permanently to Singapore are limited: “Whilst a lot of them might aspire to working in Singapore, not that many of them will succeed because of the quota system [for foreign workers]” (Interview with Head of Campus, SG). Offshore campuses’ ability to broker desired mobilities is thus limited by the state and its migration policies.

Finally, offshore campuses can be infrastructures for immobility. Previous research on transnational education has revealed their role as second-chance degrees as a last resort for acquiring an education if students are not able to access more prestigious public higher education in Hong Kong or Singapore (Cheng, 2018; Leung & Waters, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013). My sample encompasses a heterogeneous mix of different forms of campus structures, including the above-described programmes whose *raison d’être* is to curb outward migration. The Singapore Institute of Technology is a domestic institution that offers degree programmes in collaboration with foreign universities, including the University of Glasgow, the University of Newcastle, the University of Liverpool, Massey University, DigiPen, and the Culinary Institute of America that teach exclusively domestic Singaporean students. The programmes are set up as applied, postgraduate courses for students with diplomas from polytechnic institutions and are funded through grants by the Singaporean government designed to tackle skilled labour shortages in specific fields. Rather than enabling student mobilities, the infrastructural logic of the campuses is one of containment, which delivers value for the Singaporean economy.

Similar to distance education programmes, offshore branch campuses can offer students an alternative to physical mobility and migration. Breines et al. (2019) show how different types of mobile objects and systems of mobility are required to enable students in Africa not to move, and to remain in their home countries while receiving a foreign university degree. In several contexts, thus, offshore campuses enable access to higher education for those unable to access the domestic education system, either because their level of education attainment excludes them from entry or because they are excluded based on ethnicity and nationality criteria (Stephenson & Rajendram, 2019). These include, for instance, children of expatriates and foreign guest workers in the Gulf, who do not have access to the public, Arabic-language university system. Similarly, they can service residents in Malaysia, who de facto are largely excluded through ethnic quota systems from the public education system and would otherwise choose to study abroad (Koh, 2017). As such, offshore campuses can provide an alternative to international student mobilities and can serve as a “pressure valve” for ethnic tensions (Sidhu & Christie, 2014, p. 129). The motivations for students to choose “immobility” and enrol in these

programmes differs depending on individual social positions, including socially constructed categories of difference (e.g., ethnicity and gender) and the situated value attributed to transnational programmes within different geographical contexts (Sin et al., 2017).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper advances geographical thinking and theorisations by connecting literatures from different fields that have remained rather siloed, including higher education research on transnational education and international student (im) mobilities, and migration research on policies and brokerage, to theorise transnational spaces of higher education. An infrastructural perspective of higher education institutions and their offshore campuses brings to the fore new types of brokers (multi-sited universities) and a more explicit engagement with the concrete spaces of transnational education as “infrastructures of migration” (Lindquist et al., 2012) as ways to overcoming the methodological bias of students as key objects of study. Exploring the infrastructural logics of campuses, their connection to the (economic) strategies of higher education institutions and the production of value shows how they are fundamental components for student migration. Higher education institutions need to be situated alongside other migration infrastructures, notably transnational networks of students and the state.

The research has shown how offshore campuses may tap into existing mobilities, facilitate and broker (selected) international mobilities, or constitute alternatives to physical migration by offering international degrees *in situ*. The systematic typology of offshore campuses’ relations with international student mobilities advances geographic literature on transnational education, which offered previously a binary distinction between highly mobile elites and “immobile” students. By conceptualising offshore campuses as infrastructures of im/mobility that enable circulations and containment, my analysis resonates with findings by Sidhu et al. (2016, p. 1510), who found that “the practical realities of assembling global higher education suggest more striated spaces than those imagined in marketing narratives of smooth spaces peopled by flows of human capital, seeking educational brands, transposable credentials and cosmopolitan networks.”

Advancing geographic thought on migration infrastructures, I examined the spaces and sites of transnational education, including their material infrastructures to theorise their capacity in facilitating im/mobilities. Mobilities and im mobilities, understood as relational categories, lie at the heart of the value propositions and economic rationales of offshore campuses. Their ability and effectiveness to channel actual international student mobilities differed crucially, shaped by their capacities and their embeddedness within national territories and regimes of migration, which involve conflicting goals with economic strategies of circulation and containment.

Future critical geographical scholarship on transnational education could expand on the discursive dimensions that shape students’ aspirations, desires and imaginaries. Universities use their campuses as discursive spaces to construct value by associating themselves with positively connoted places elsewhere. It is interesting in this regard to also focus on the “dissociations” (Ibert et al., 2019) from actual geographies, such as a campus with Indian origins aiming to make its transnational relation less visible or obscure it. Moreover, the symbolic constructions of institutions are not unchallenged and studies could focus further on how students (and staff) actively renegotiate and subvert these messages (Cheng, 2018; Phan, 2017; Siltaoja et al., 2019).

A limitation of the study’s focus on the meso-level of universities’ strategies is that it does not reveal how offshore campuses as infrastructures of im/mobility affect individuals along socially constructed categories of difference. In most interviews, diversity was simply understood as the number of students from different nationalities enrolled at the offshore campuses. Transnational education, however, may in many ways reproduce rather than overcome existing social inequalities, of which class seems to be critically under-acknowledged (Yang, 2018).

Another limitation of the analysis of offshore campuses as infrastructures of im/mobilities is their temporal restriction to individual study programmes. International student mobilities may not constitute a single movement but may involve trajectories spanning multiple locations following “stepwise” mobility patterns that are also common in Filipino labour migration (Paul, 2017). Students enrolled in offshore campuses enabling limited mobilities and containments may use these campuses nonetheless as springboard for future international mobilities, for instance by following postgraduate degrees elsewhere, including in the home countries of their transnational degree providers. As such, the regional student migrations have to be set within the complex transnational biographies of students (Koh, 2017; Sidhu, 2006) and graduates, and require further study on students’ postgraduate trajectories.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The qualitative data that support the findings of this study cannot be shared because interviewees agreed to participate in the study on the basis of not sharing their data beyond members of the research group.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The (re)production of *social* mobilities and immobilities is thus not the focus of this study (but see, for example, Waters & Leung, 2013).
- ² The General Agreement on Trade in Service classifies transnational education as a tradable service through a commercial presence abroad (mode 3), which is different from international student mobility (mode 1), or staff mobility (mode 2).
- ³ Other regions with large offshore campus concentrations are less diverse. Qatar, for instance, hosts primarily US institutions; in China, due to government regulations only joint ventures with Chinese institutions exist.
- ⁴ The names of participating institutions are not disclosed in this study. Wherever names of institutions are mentioned, the relevant information has been acquired through publicly available sources.
- ⁵ See McGettigan (2013, pp. 35–6).

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