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Parvati Raghuram, Markus Breines & Ashley Gunter

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Conceptualising place and non-place in internationalisation of higher education research

Parvati Raghuram a, Markus Breines b and Ashley Gunter c

aGeography and Environmental Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK; bFafo, Oslo, Norway; cThe Department of Geography, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT
Space and place are central concepts in research on the internationalisation of higher education. However, although the spaces of international student migration have been theorised (Raghuram, 2013), there is a limited understanding of how place matters in the internationalisation literature. This paper schematises this literature to highlight the main ways in which place and internationalisation have been brought together in the current research. It extends the current analysis by exploring the place as location, as locales produced in and through networks - personal, institutional, national, contemporary and historical - and universities as non-places. The paper draws on research with Zimbabwean, Nigerian and Namibian international distance education students who study at the University of South Africa (UNISA) to construct a conceptual architecture of different forms of place and non-place. It ends by setting out a new perspective and research agenda on progressive politics of place for those studying the internationalisation of higher education.

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Internationalisation; place; non-place; higher education; networks; hierarchies

Introduction

Place is an important and increasingly studied aspect in the geographies of internationalisation of higher education (Beech 2019). For instance, questions about where students migrate to and from, are as important as why they move or how. As a result, there have been a range of discussions of place and how this influences student destination choices and experiences of internationalisation. Although Raghuram (2013) has conceptualised the spaces of international student migration, there has been less attention to how place matters in these conceptualisations. This paper addresses that gap.

It adopts location and locale as two definitions of place to map how place has been conceptualised in internationalisation of higher education research. Geographical research on place as location highlights its exclusive qualities that make it unique. On the other hand, place as locale highlights the multiple connections that go to make up place (Massey 1991). Places as locales are defined through the spatial relations that produce them. Secondly, the paper extends these current ways of thinking by demonstrating how place as locale can be seen as networked and relational or as non-places. Non-places are places through which people circulate, but which hold little meaning for them as their experiences of non-places are transitory (Augé 2008).
The paper considers location, locale and non-place through the case of international distance education students—a phenomenon that has been little studied (Mittelmeier et al. 2020). Higher education is an expensive enterprise, and many students choose distance education because of the lower cost of travel, relocation and accommodation. Secondly, these students are also often unable or unwilling to move and depend on the infrastructures of immobility to access education (Breines, Raghuram, and Gunter 2019). Students in rural areas (Gruenhagen, Mccracken, and True 1999), secure places like prisons (Farley and Hopkins 2017), out-of-the-way places like submarines (Baccolod and Chaudhary 2018), and those who are unable to move due to disability are all over-represented in the distance education sector. They are, arguably, contained in place. Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many institutions to go online, and more teaching was being offered at a distance—from short courses to full degree programmes—so that distance education became an increasing part of many students’ lives. Although the COVID-19 related restrictions to face-to-face teaching have been relaxed, many institutions have adopted more hybrid models of teaching which retain both face-to-face and blended elements. These students’ sense of place offers an interesting twist to existing research on internationalisation which largely focus on international student migrants (Beech 2014).

Scholars have analysed how places are imagined and lived in by international student migrants (Beech 2014; Collins 2013), endow students with symbolic currency (Prazeres et al. 2017) and with economic, social and cultural value, which they imbibe through the location of their institutions. Students may interact with these geographical locations through their mobility, as in the case of international student migrants, or through their institutions when studying on branch campuses in the cases of transnational education (TNE). Moreover, many international student migrants choose a study destination that may be seen as enjoyable because it offers a rich social and cultural life (Beech 2014; Prazeres 2018). These experiential qualities of place are compared favourably to students’ current location as well as to other alternative destinations to which students could have moved in order to shape study and mobility decisions. The experiences of place among international distance education students are, however, qualitatively different from those of students who move.

Distance education affords students opportunities to access quality education without travelling to any campus, either abroad or in-country (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011), so their experiences and narrations of place will, arguably, differ from those of students who migrate. They may have imaginaries of the library, the halls and perhaps even their tutors’ offices but they rarely (if ever) visit them. Rather, the universities and their locations are primarily sites where fees are collected, educational materials assembled and distributed, and perhaps examinations held. Students rarely attend these places so their attachment to the place of study could be tenuous. These are, in effect, non-places for those students. However, place continues to have meaning, even for distance education students.

This paper offers a perspective on place and non-place through the lens of international distance education students in Africa, a group which has received little attention in the literature. Less than 9% of Africa’s school leaving population currently access higher education, but this proportion is predicted to grow (Baker 2022). Internationalisation will be part of the answer to growing demand for higher education, but not all students will be able to move or to attend branch campuses. Many will, instead, access international education abroad or at home through face-to-face education. Hence, internationalisation at a distance will also be part of the mix in providing for future students in Africa.

The paper focuses on this group of students but in doing so, it utilises their experiences to exemplify different conceptualisations of place. It eschews long-held tendencies in the social sciences to emplace the African case to see what it reveals about Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), and instead uses the empirical examples to explore relationships between place and internationalisation more broadly. It thus contributes to a rich tradition of geographical conceptualisations of place and non-place.
In the rest of the paper, we first provide an overview of engagements on place in geography to provide a conceptual map for wider analysis before engaging with the existing literature on internationalisation and place. This is followed by an empirical examination of student perspectives, which reveal a range of narratives of place – as location, locale and as non-place.

**Place and non-place**

Places are usually thought of as a location with distinctive features that makes it unique (Tuan 2011). They are imbued with meanings which arise from how they are experienced and inhabited. This is how place is conceptualised in the humanistic tradition in Geography. These understandings were eloquently developed by early French geographers such as Vidal de La Blache (1926) and in the writings of the landscape geographer Carl Sauer (1925). They argued for the importance of people in constituting place, highlighting that it is not simply a site in which human endeavours unfold but rather is shaped by the inhabitants of place. Places are also therefore emergent, dynamic and changing. These early conceptualisations, however, were at risk of sometimes seeing place as an areal unit, as having limits and therefore being bounded, albeit integrally situated within a mosaic of places (Cresswell 2009). This body of work has left a unique and important legacy – theorisations of place as a location. Using rich ethnographic empirical work, humanist geographers have explored the qualities that make up place (Buttimer and Seamon 1990).

The mobility of people, ideas and goods between places may appear to challenge this uniqueness. Marxist geographer, David Harvey, argued that the speeding up of capital was leading to time–space compression (1990) threatening the uniqueness and cohesiveness of place. A place, albeit of different scales, whether it be a home, or village, or even a country, can appear to offer continuity and belonging in an ever-changing world. It produces a sense of identity and helps to tether people to the certainties of the past and of an imagined future. Place, then offers a welcome retreat from temporal, social and spatial change. It offers historical continuity and the certainties often afforded as a result. Globalisation and its associated mobilities, Harvey argued (1990), can diminish and disrupt the continuity and cohesiveness of place.

Places are also seen as embedded in power relations (Pred 1984). For instance, the ranking of cities or the hierarchies between a centre and a periphery are produced by the power effects that a place has. Cities, for instance, may be shaped by global imaginaries of places as more or less influential or desirable. These comparisons can hierarchise places in relatively fine-grained ways. Regional powers, semi-peripheries and medium-sized towns are all manifestations of these hierarchies (Relph 1976). Importantly, these hierarchies can drive the aspiration to be mobile, whether it be from a smaller town to a bigger one or indeed from the urban to the rural. Comparisons across these hierarchies of place shape mobility. Hence, conceptualising place in the context of mobilities and inequalities between places is an important endeavour.

The challenge of mobility to place was most explicitly addressed by Doreen Massey (1994), who conceptualised places as locales, and as always changing. She suggested that conceptualising place as ‘articulated moments in networks of social relations’ (Massey 1991, 29) goes beyond an exclusionary and ossified sense of place. This more progressive definition of place recognises that place is an instantiation of spatial connections and is produced relationally. This idea of place as locale recognises that places are produced through a multiplicity of relations – economic, political, social and cultural, both contemporarily and over time. This does not mean that places are not unique – after all, places are unique instantiations of distinctive combinations of connections. If place is conceptualised relationally, as an ‘assemblages of disparate threads’ (Pierce and Martin 2015, 1292), they are also always connected to other places and it is the unique qualities of these connections that distinguish places. In this progressive sense of place, places are not bounded or fixed but are always changing as goods, people and ideas move through this network of places.

Finally, while there has been a plethora of research on place, the anthropologist Marc Augé (2008) has argued that supermodernity leads to the growth of non-places, those that one simply moves
through but which hold little meaning. This is not the same as placelessness, which for Relph (1976),
is a mark of repetition and loss of meaning, of the reproducibility produced by industrial mechanisms,
whereby place loses its individuality. A non-place, on the other hand, is a place defined by the traject-
ories and circulations that pass through it, rather than through inhabitations. In his theorisation
Augé draws on (but also extends) the work of others, such as de Certeau (1984, 130), who argued
that ‘[T]o walk is to lack a place. It is the in-definite process of being absent’. Augé famously uses air-
ports and bus-stops as examples of non-places. You move between places through non-places – where
one leaves behind an experience (the origin place) and looks forward to another (reaching the desti-
nation) but never really pay attention to what makes that place through which you are passing.

Although the notion of non-place has some merit in that it emphasises flows, Augé’s concept has
been criticised. For instance, Merriman (2009) argues that globalisation, the driver of supermoder-
nity, does not produce sameness but can play out, be appropriated (and rejected) differently in
different places. Hence, uniformity is not guaranteed even in non-places. Secondly, modernity
and supermodernity are arguably ascribed with too much causal power to effect change; changes
of the kind that produce non-places are not new but have historic antecedents. Moreover, and
most importantly for this paper, places can become non-places and vice-versa. A location can be
a non-place at times or for some people but not for others. Airport terminals are places of work,
create affect through the ways that they are arranged and can be ranked as better and worse for
the experience they offer (also see Edensor 2003). While they can be places, Augé’s intervention
reminds us that not all places are experienced equally or equivalently. These different takes on
place are all significant for studies of internationalisation as they offer varied insights into how
place comes to matter in international higher education, a topic we turn to in the next section.

Internationalisation and place – a review

Place as location: institutions, cities, countries and regions

Territorial approaches to place that focus on place as location are important in the geographies of
internationalisation (Chow and Healey 2008). This may be at many different scales – university,
city, country or region, to which international students want to move (see Table 1). Here, the
focus is on the institution as a place. The most important way in discussions of institutions as
place manifests is through locational choice. Student choice may be influenced by a number of fac-
tors such prestige of the institution, fee regimes and affordability and so on (see below). These insti-
tutions are made desirable to students through marketing and branding (Beech 2014; Singh et al.
2014). Some of the values of place are assumed to be transferable to students (Prazeres et al.
2017), as students may get better jobs if they graduate from famous universities.

These institutions are often in cities and towns which also gain a reputation as good hosting cities
for international students. At times the place becoming metonymical with the institution, as in univer-
Sity towns such as Oxford or Cambridge (Brandt and de Mortanges 2011). These places have affective
qualities, offering status to the student so that eventually ‘place inhabits us’ (Sundstrom 2003, 90).
Some places such as Madrid and Paris regularly appear as the prime destination choice for student
migrants in Europe moving through the Erasmus programme, as students seek out the sociality of

| Table 1. Place as located in internationalisation research: migration and mobility. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Destination** | **Origin** |
| University as placed | Universities as destination | University that are left behind due to lower ranking or prestige |
| Cities as placed | Towns and cities as destination | Cities and town as sites that are left behind: economic and political drivers |
| Countries as placed | Countries as destination | Countries with limited access to quality education which drives international student mobility |
| Regions | Regional governance; intra-regional mobility |
life in these cities (Van Mol and Timmerman 2014). These places are expected to enhance the quality of embodied student experience. Research has therefore focused on how student migrants experience new places (Ho 2017; Smith and Khawaja 2011) and how they negotiate their surroundings (Collins et al. 2014; Maundeni 2001). These studies offer a more affective and emotional register to place as a unique location for international students (Collins 2008).

There are also studies of the countries to and from which students migrate (Chankseliani 2016; Thomas and Inkpen 2017; Weber and Van Mol 2023). Both the value of countries as intermediary places and the lack of access to quality education (Kritz 2015) in origin countries have been investigated. Moreover, the distances students have to travel to access education and how political turmoil can drive migration (Gunter et al., forthcoming) have also been of interest.

A further body of work focuses on ways in which regional governance influences students’ education and mobility (Knight and Morshidi 2011; Robertson 2012). One of the most successful such schemes is the European Bologna process. Here, typically, educational systems are extended out across the region to create a degree of uniformity in student experience.

### Place as location: curriculum and study

While the research cited above focuses on reasons and processes of internationalisation and student mobility, another body of research has focused on how place manifests and is negotiated by international students during study in the classroom and beyond and in the curriculum (See Table 2). International students are often ‘placed’, for instance as East Asian (McGowan and Potter 2008), and racialised assumptions made about their learning styles (Fenwick 2011; Spangler and Adriansen 2021). However, as Song and McCarthy (2018) argue these ‘placings’ of students and pedagogic styles are themselves outcomes of orientalist perceptions of places. This influences all international students in different ways. For instance, students are ‘placed’ through their WhatsApp numbers in study groups and are differentially included based on their place (Madge et al. 2019) even among distance education students. On the other hand, students also market places through their social media accounts, showing students the inner workings of university life – the town, the university, the accommodation they live in and the leisure facilities around (Jayadeva 2020).

Place also deeply influences curriculum content (Gunter and Raghuram 2018), especially in some disciplines such as history and geography. The coloniality of higher education often places Western knowledge centre-stage. For instance, as Gunter and Raghuram’s (2018) interviewees at a branch campus in Johannesburg, South Africa, point out, some subjects like philosophy are seen as Western and the teaching begins with Plato whereas African philosophers and philosophies are rarely taught. Many universities are trying to address legacies of colonialism and the weighting towards Western knowledges (Thondhlana et al. 2021), but there is little research about how place appears in study materials and the implications for international students as curricula may become too focused around the host country to be useful for them.

### Place as locale

Internationalisation research also shows how places are affected and changed by students (Collins 2008). This follows in, and contributes to, the vein of thinking on how places as locales are made

| Table 2. Place as located in internationalisation research: curriculum and study. |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Students as placed | Ascriptions of place in the classroom, e.g. Orientalism | Virtual classroom and place |
| Social media as placed | Racism against students in some places in virtual study groups due to their location | Using social media to get to know about places |
| Curriculum as placed | Western/Decolonial or localised; place-based education | |

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through social relations (See Table 3). Researchers have analysed how students change places through their presence – economically, socially, politically and culturally (Aloyo and Wentzel 2011; Collins 2008; 2010). Importantly, such research on international student migration highlights how places are valued not for the stability and sameness that they offer but the excitement, the change and the speed of interactions (Van Mol and Timmerman 2014). Others have written about the effects students have on the places they leave behind through remittances and through knowledge transfer (Pham 2017). In these studies, place not only acts upon students but is also acted upon. International students, therefore, embody some of Massey (1994) conceptual critique of the inward-looking conceptualisation of place, instead exemplifying the more progressive sense of place which is always being made and remade.

**Non-places**

Although meanings of place have been studied in different ways, non-places have received little attention in studies of internationalisation. The little that exists has focused on how to marry a more universal curriculum content, which is not situated in place, with the demand for place-based education (Shannon and Galle 2017). For instance, Engelbrecht (2020) is concerned about the extent to which German coursebooks in South Africa abstract away from the particularities of both Germany and South Africa. It does not recognise the classroom as a situated locale where understandings of another place are cultivated through language learning. In these instances, place-based education (language and environmental) is in tension with the classroom as a non-place through which students are expected to move. Another area where place matters is environmental education, where there is a tradition of place-based enquiry (Gruenewald 2003). Researchers have analysed what non-place means for education as it is separated from its anthropological context. For instance, Nakagawa and Payne (2017) have shown how study abroad students in Australia try to move quickly through places such as the field-sites they are visiting in order to maximise their experience of the country. Through a sophisticated analysis of space–time² the authors (Nakagawa and Payne 2017) offer insights into the transitivity, creativity and re-normalising of non-place, which are student tactics to give meaning to place even if they are on very short study abroad programmes. Although students on such programmes are likely to experience the places they visited during their time abroad as a non-place, they used these strategies to give meaning to the places they lived in and visited.

**Researching distance education in Africa**

Higher education in Africa is growing at high rates with the number of students at African institutions increasing from 5.9 million in 2010 to 8.3 million in 2019 (Bayusuf et al. 2021). In addition, there are over 400,000 African international student migrants throughout the world (Harris 2020). The most common destination countries are the UK, the USA, Germany and Saudi Arabia (Schulmann 2017). Increasingly, African students also choose to study internationally within Africa with sizable international student populations in South Africa, Ghana and Morocco. The higher education offerings for these students are vast with private, public and distance education institutions across the continent looking to attract students from other African countries (Ndofirepi, Farinloye, and Mogaji 2020). However, distance education is taking on a more significant role as the demand for quality higher education increases and currently there are 42 members of the African Council
for Distance Education of which universities make up the vast majority. These institutions represent the large numbers of distance education students across the continent (Makoe 2018).

South Africa has become a regional and continental hub for higher education in Africa because of its ‘quality, affordability, location, social connections, and stability’ (Lee and Sehoole 2015, 841), characteristics that help shape it as a desirable destination for students. There are currently approximately 45,000 international students registered in South Africa spread out among its 26 universities (OECD 2019). These students are attracted to South Africa because of its educational infrastructure and the comparatively poor educational facilities in their home countries (Hiralal 2015). As not all students can move South African distance education is becoming increasingly important on the continent (Butcher et al. 2011; Karsenti and Collin 2013).

The University of South Africa (UNISA) is one of the largest universities in Africa, with over 381,483 students in 2018 of whom, about 23,502 were international, defined as students who do not have either citizenship or permanent residence status in South Africa (UNISA 2021). The students range from across Africa with by far the largest cohort being Zimbabweans. Other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries (countries with whom South Africa has a preferential education fee regime) also contribute large numbers. The lack of locational requirements – no time needs to be spent on a campus or centre in South Africa – coupled with its reputation as a provider of quality education in Africa has attracted many regional students from within SADC and other parts of Africa.

Questions of place have a particular meaning in South Africa, where there are real attempts to address the effects of race-based segregation and inequalities after the dismantling of apartheid (Webb 2023). These attempts have been supercharged through the language and politics of decolonisation and movements such as #Feesmustfall (Boysen 2016). However, all these target local students rather than international ones (Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter 2020). Yet, South Africa remains a hub for international students on the continent, especially for those in the SADC region.

This paper is based on a research project exploring the role of UNISA’s distance education provision in enabling equitable access to education in Africa (October 2016–June 2019). Distance education has proliferated rapidly, enabled by technological changes, and hence the availability of online provision in a variety of formats. For instance, some distance education provision is open, requires no prior qualifications and can be taken as small modules, often for free, as in the case of open educational resources and MOOCs. Distance education in our study is different; it parallels face-to-face study as it involves some prior qualification, leads to a degree and is not free. It is also offered through a blended model – with some online delivery, which is supplemented by books, and other written teaching materials that are delivered to students. The only difference is that it is offered at a distance and can be accessed by people who do not come to any physical campus (Bayne, Gallagher, and Lamb 2014).

The study was a collaboration between UNISA in South Africa and The Open University in the UK. The project employed a mixed methods approach that included analytics of students’ learning outcomes, a survey questionnaire with 1295 students studying at UNISA, as well as semi-structured interviews with 165 students (77 women and 88 men). For this paper, interview data from the 165 students was utilised. Most students were recruited from the College of Science Engineering and Technology, however, in order to increase the number of participants, later in the project an invite was sent to all students at the university.

The interviewees were recruited through their survey participation. Thirty lived in South Africa, 85 in Zimbabwe, 40 Namibia and 10 in Nigeria. This paper only draws on international students, who, by definition, lived outside South Africa. Distance education students from the case-study countries were interviewed in English by six postdoctoral researchers over the 30-month duration of the study (September 2016–March 2019). English was used as this is the language of instruction at UNISA and all students would have a level of proficiency in order to conduct their studies. The interviews were conducted via Skype to phone (Cin et al. 2021). All interviews were done voluntarily, and students were informed that this was an external project, and they would not be identified to anyone outside the project. Three interview schedules were developed which had a suite of common questions but
due to restrictions of time and internet connectivity the second half of the schedules adopted three different foci: migration, social media and student adaptation to the academic environment. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded in NVivo through a combination of deductive methods using the key themes in research design and inductive coding structure based on emergent themes in the data. The in-depth analysis of the data, as well as use of several methods of data collection facilitated a deep understanding of distance education in Africa and the broader context of UNISA students’ learning environment. The original data was collected to study migration, social media and student adaptation but subsequently, some issues that emerged repeatedly within the student narratives were also considered. This included questions of access, the difficulties in affording fees and the migration intentions of the students (Mittelmeier et al. 2022; Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter 2020). The analysis in this paper draws on the interviews where students emphasised the choice of South Africa and the ways in which they experienced place from afar.

**Internationalisation, place and non-place**

UNISA’s main offices in South Africa are located in Pretoria. These offices are places of collection, co-ordination, communication and of credentialling (Gunter et al. 2020). They collect fees, register the students and co-ordinate the distribution of teaching materials, examination and tutoring, communicate with students regularly about their progress and about the regulatory requirements, and award them their credentials. However, students rarely go to the UNISA campuses, and instead rely on the infrastructures such as the online provision of tuition, the social media-based teaching groups and the ability to undertake a lot of the administrative work online, which allow them to stay in situ and study (Breines, Raghuram, and Gunter 2019). Because of the proximity between South Africa and Zimbabwe, some Zimbabwean international students do occasionally visit the regional offices in South Africa. For most students, engagements with UNISA are, however, at a distance.

Although UNISA is a distance education institution it mattered to students as a place, as a site, and as a university located in a particular country. This had implications for their view of the university, the curriculum and their sense of the possibilities that South Africa could open up in the future. In doing so, students referred to place as both location and locale – as we will explore below.

**Internationalisation and place as location**

Our interviewees often spoke about the location of the physical university as a reason for joining UNISA. They were drawn to the university because it is situated in South Africa, comparing it favourably to the qualities of the place or country in which they were living. Students said that the quality of local higher education was poor as they obtained limited support from lecturers, irregular teaching and outdated course materials. They were concerned about the quality of the education in their country:

> In Zimbabwe, it’s mostly something that is developed just for people to have a qualification. People learn but they don’t get to really understand. It will not equip you for the world, but that’s we have. That’s part of the curriculum in Zimbabwe. It’s not evolving and it means that you would have an irrelevant qualification in the end. [Chipo, Zimbabwean man]

Chipo’s concerns regarding higher education were embedded in a broader pessimism regarding the educational situation in Zimbabwe (Shumba and Mawere 2012; Tevera 2005). Such issues were not limited to Zimbabwe. Several Namibian students too raised similar concerns about access to quality higher education in their country:

> We literally just have two main universities in Namibia, and they don’t really specialise in Company Secretarial. The lowest qualification you can get is actually Office Administration, that’s a degree, and that I already have but it doesn’t really prepare you to become a Company Secretary. It’s mostly just basic. Most
of the modules are just introductory modules. Nothing goes into detail compared to the education that we are offered through distance in South Africa. [Tuli, Namibian woman]

In both instances, the quality of education is described through place, drawing upon the frameworks, the practices and the systems that are set up in place to regulate education. In these narratives, place has an intrinsic quality that is located and unique. Place is used as a synecdoche, so that the name of the country refers to education governance and quality in that place.

The students also extended these meanings of place to South Africa as the country was seen as having intrinsic qualities in their educational system that were specific to place:

Yeah, the quality in South Africa is a little higher than our local ones. They give you lots of material to expand your understanding, your knowledge. That gives the South African students an upper hand because their horizons are more broadened than our local ones. [Silas, Namibian man]

This was the reason why many students preferred studying there rather than in universities in their own countries. Rufaro, a Zimbabwean man, explained: ‘I particularly chose South Africa, because you know in this part of the world, South Africa is our USA’. South Africa is thus portrayed as the ‘best’ place in the region, making it clear why he wanted to study there. Another factor that many students emphasised was that the degrees from South Africa were considered to be more valuable than local degrees. For instance, Faith, a Zimbabwean woman, said; ‘If I’m not mistaken the UNISA degrees are recognised worldwide, unlike Zimbabwean ones’. Importantly, these qualities related to education and educational materials, rather than the city where the university is located, because it is through study that students related to place. Most research on student destination choices focus on the symbolic, economic or social qualities of place; few focus on access to good quality student materials, which, however, appears much more importantly as a driver of choice of country of registration in distance education.

Locational uniqueness was, however, not always appreciated. This was particularly the case in relation to teaching materials. For example, the South African materials were not necessarily applicable to the Namibian context:

Most of the courses of the university is from the South African perspective. And I find even the economics, it’s not just general macroeconomics or general microeconomics, everything is based on a South Africa perspective. Which is also actually ridiculous because everybody studying at the university are not South African and we do not work in a South Africa climate, so for me, it would have been better to have general microeconomics and general macroeconomics. [Jade, Namibian woman]

Although the two countries are close economic partners, Namibia’s independence from South Africa in 1990 has created distance and difference in legal, economic and higher education systems as they have developed in distinctive ways. Moreover, the distinctions between the two countries were becoming more acute as South Africa made reparations for its own apartheid past by altering its teaching materials to become more South African focused, as a Nigerian male student stated:

Adesina: And as well they can introduce policies that are inimical to an average student life. In my department for instance, there was a course that was really introduced. And it was made compulsory. In other words, if you don’t pass that course you cannot graduate. And it’s called ‘Advanced Indigenous Law.’

Researcher: So very specific to South Africa then?

Adesina: It’s been – very specific, that’s right – you know. It’s fine, it’s good, because they want people to know the history of where they are in. But you cannot do that and make it compulsory for even international students. OK?

Decolonising the curriculum, like many other elements of place-based education, can be a challenge for international students, especially those studying at a distance.

**Place within a hierarchy of places**

While there has been much focus on the most popular international student destinations, intermediate places are also important in the context of distance education. Our informants
generally ranked South Africa higher than Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Namibia but lower than other desirable destinations such as USA. In such instances, South Africa can act as an escalator place, enabling further movement due to its connectivity to global markets and its educational reputation in countries in the global North. Chris, a Namibian man who was aspiring to move to the UK, where he had friends and family, was optimistic that he would be able to get a visa and that he could get a job there: ‘According to UNISA the degree is international, so yeah, I hope that it will be acceptable there as well’. He found that distance education had put him closer to where ‘the information is coming from and closer to knowledge’. For him, South Africa sits between Namibia/Zimbabwe/Nigeria and other places like the UK, which become accessible through a South African degree. Students felt that studying in a South African institution, even without moving there, will help them to move to these more desirable countries (for a detailed analysis of study abroad intentions of distance education students, see Mittelmeier et al. 2022). The low but steady growth rates of the South African economy alongside the networked power of being part of organisations like BRICS has extended South Africa’s political strength, alliances and deeper engagement with global issues, emphasising it as a globally significant place.

For other students, South Africa’s intermediate place in the hierarchy of places was enough to make it an endpoint in their life-plans. The value accruing from distance study in South Africa could potentially be converted into migration plans.

I’m still trying to see what I can do, but the first thing that I’m looking forward to is getting a scholarship, so I’m just trying to wait for the opening. I want to apply in South Africa, I think I’m going to apply there, to the South African School of Applied Psychology. [Tsitisi, Zimbabwean woman].

Moreover, for some, the upper echelons of the hierarchy simply disappeared. Many places were equal in being better than Zimbabwe. For instance, Faith, introduced above, did not have any specific migration plans in the future, but was open to opportunities that may arise. In doing so, she gave a sense of how she put South Africa in the same category as other places: ‘I wouldn’t mind South Africa. I wouldn’t mind the United States of America, the United Kingdom’. South Africa was not a steppingstone, but an equivalent migrant destination. Regional powers like South Africa are seen as part of a multipolar world (Pieterse 2011; World Bank 2011), as possible sites for international higher education. However, place can also be conceptualised in more relational ways (Campbell 2016), as Massey (1994) has proposed.

**Place as locale**

**Places as relational: networked places**

Theorising place, not just as unique, but also as produced in and through networks, can help to highlight the varied mobilities that are important in facilitating and shaping internationalisation of higher education. For international distance education students these mobilities are particularly important as they themselves are immobile, at least in relation to study. They gain ideas and knowledge as well as the benefits of brand value, contacts and networks but only at a distance (for a detailed analysis of social media networks and distance education see Breines, Madge, and Dalu 2020; Madge et al. 2019).

Many Zimbabwean students were familiar with the value of studying at UNISA because of their personal networks:

You know UNISA is popular in Southern Africa. I know a lot of people who have studied through UNISA that are successful. It’s almost like in every institution in Zimbabwe you find someone at executive level who did a UNISA degree. Lawyers included. I know quite a number of lawyers who have done their law degree with UNISA and they seem to be doing fine. [Farai, Zimbabwean man]

Not all relations were personal. Famous alumni constituted a public network of which students wanted to be a part. This contributed to the institution’s international appeal:
I decided that I want to do a degree and then I went through the different universities via the internet to see who can offer me distance learning. So, I came across UNISA and I read about their history and stuff and I learned that they are actually 145 years old this year. For me it was then, okay, I see that this is a well-equipped institution with regards to distance learning and they have a history on that and all the big names also started there like the late Nelson Mandela so for me that was an inspiration, that’s how I got to know about UNISA via the internet and how I decided that I’m going to study with them. [Ngazetungue, Namibian man]

As Ngazetungue states, the history of UNISA was important in shaping prospective students’ engagement with South Africa (Boucher 1973). The role of famous alumni as a strong influencing factor has been noted in other parts of the world, too (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002).

Shared colonial relations and historical networks could also influence choice of study. These linkages lead to commonalities in some subjects, which though often governed by national regulations still share a common basis (Naudé 2013) as a law student remarked:

In effect, the materials are forecasting only the laws of South Africa. But South African law and Zimbabwean law is the same Roman-Dutch law. Even the scenarios, the situations, they are almost the same. [Tongai, a Zimbabwean man]

These historical affiliations are crucial in shaping decisions of where to study because the validity of the degree at home is dependent on them.

This networked approach to place enables destination choices to be seen not as a one-off spatio-temporal decision but one that is influenced by ongoing relations between places. The origin country and the destination country (the country in which the study institution is registered), are not distinct and separate but rather can be seen as part of ongoing relational networks – personal and professional; social, institutional and national; historical and contemporary.

**Bringing places into relation**

In the above examples, the places were already related. However, places can also be brought into relation through relational practices. Here we emphasise the techniques for bringing into relation – rankings and geographical imaginaries which allow students to know South Africa from afar.

The importance of international rankings was evident among our interviewees. Some of them had considered the ranking of universities to decide where to study and had found that South African universities were the highest ranked ones in Africa:

They rank the universities to say, ‘This university is top; this one is number nine and this is whatever number.’ I don’t know what they are using in order to come up with that rank, but you find that the South African universities are always on top there. So when you are having a UNISA degree, normally you seem to be superior to someone with a degree from somewhere else. [Kuda, Zimbabwean man]

Rankings bring universities, and the places in which they are located, which may be physically far apart, into relation by juxtaposing them on a database.

Crucially, rankings produce expressive attachments to place. It produces a desire to study in some places rather than others. The ranking provided legitimacy to the highly ranked universities among students, as Jade from Namibia explained: ‘The ranking of the university also plays a role because there is no use in wasting your time and your money for a degree that, at the end of the day, doesn’t serve any purpose’. Consequently, degrees from South Africa were seen as better investments as they were legitimised by the high ranking of the universities, which would provide higher returns in terms of better prospects. This process of transforming complex organisations such as universities into a specific form of value on a ranking database is one way in which places are brought into relation.

Secondly, places are also brought into relation through geographical imaginaries about what the place can offer in the future (Lysgård and Rye 2017). This is the mobility capital of places. However, distance education students felt that they could acquire this mobility capital of a South African degree without actually moving to South Africa. Students could use the infrastructures of
immobility – the ability to learn at a distance to choose to be immobile (Breines, Raghuram, and Gunter 2019). But they could also use their geographical imagines of place, their place engagements with South Africa, to catapult them into planning meaningful movement in the future (Kölbel 2020). For example, a Zimbabwean man, Sam, explained that he was considering his options for moving abroad:

I would probably look beyond because I do feel Africa in general is … I wouldn’t say volatile, but it certainly doesn’t have the stability of some of the other continents in terms of social securities and jobs and economies, so I’d probably look further afield than just Southern Africa. I am considering Europe and perhaps North America and perhaps Australia or New Zealand, but at this stage my first option would probably be Europe.

Place operates here not by separating the virtual from the real, or the symbolic from the linear, but by the logic of mobility as capital that attachments to place provide, even at a distance, and which produces place. As a result, places as locales are brought in relation to each other through networks and hierarchies.

**Internationalisation and non-place**

UNISA could also be seen as a non-place to our interviewees. UNISA manifests as a non-place in three ways: a place that is absent, as a non-place which is transient, and a place which is mediated.

For some students, UNISA became a problem because it was a university marked by the absence of locally accessible campuses. This absence of place was an issue:

And those ones that are fortunate enough to be in Pretoria probably, or where they have campuses, is in a better position. And also, some of the subjects they’re offering are really subjects that you need to have a lecturer and, unfortunately, they do not even have, I mean like to give you an example, in Namibia they have so many students in Namibia but they do not even have a regional office in Namibia.9 [Walde, male student, Namibia]

The problems of UNISA being placeless became particularly acute when the core activities that UNISA as place could fulfil, such as managing the records of the exams that students have taken, did not get done properly:

there was a particular session there were a mix-up with our academic records. And we had problem with getting answers from the university due to that. And when the university eventually communicated with me, it was like, ‘Listen, we want to try and [cushion up] the issues that you have, you will need to retake these papers. It will not cost you anything’. But the problem is that we have lost some years, some ground. [Chukwudumaga, Nigerian man]

Secondly, UNISA’s campuses were sometimes referred to as places through which they move in and out of quite quickly. This is particularly so for students who take examinations in small towns where UNISA rents buildings to hold these examinations. For these students, UNISA becomes emplaced during the exam season. Such places and the students’ interactions with them are both transient. Nevertheless, as Chukwudumaga went on to say, the exam centres are often not centrally or conveniently located. Students may travel 5 or 6 hours by bus to reach these centres. Examinations are also held on different days, so students have to travel up to these locations on multiple occasions or stay over and bear the cost burden. Hence, the transience of the students’ interactions with the university as place, along with its accessibility were both noted. Importantly, it is not only the student who moves in and out of UNISA, but UNISA’s physical situatedness in those examination sites is also transient.

Finally, for many students UNISA was mediated and experienced digitally through online portals and the social media. All materials are made available through the UNISA portal, which in many ways stands in for the university. The university is also made real through social media – both Facebook and WhatsApp groups are used by module teams to facilitate conversation between students, share exam tips and answer queries (Madge et al. 2019). For many students, the university is therefore almost entirely virtual, another modality through which it becomes a non-place.
Conclusions

Although there have been some theorisations of the spaces of international study (Raghuram 2013), less attention has been paid to how place comes to matter in internationalisation. This paper addresses that gap.

It highlights some ways in which place is conceptualised in the literature on internationalisation. Towards this, it draws on wider geographical theorisations of place as location and as locale to set out a framework. It illustrates how place matters for international distance education students even though they rarely access the campus. Place manifested as an institutional location as well as in relation to people and to the curriculum, each of which impacts their study. Place was invoked as a physical location in multiple ways – as a location which offers better quality education but also as one where the material was too situated in local epistemologies or legal systems, posing a challenge for international students. This is an issue that place-based education faces when it internationalises. Students also recognised that places occur within a hierarchy of places and that even from afar they could benefit from the position of UNISA within such hierarchies.

Places were also seen as locales – as the bases of networks past and present. Alumni were an important way in which people identified with UNISA as a place. Those who have passed through have left their imprint. Students identified with these associations and networks, and therefore to UNISA. Finally, the paper throws light on how places are relational. They bring together distant places through folding the spaces in between. Places which are physically distant can be brought close through rankings in a database. The manipulation of place through criteria about quality juxtaposes places which are physically far apart. Moreover, places occur in space–time as places are imaged and imagined as destination sites, bringing them into the temporal present through geographical imaginaries.

These ways of conceptualising place look outwards at how place is formed through imaginations. Significantly, these forms of conceptualising place need not be distinct. For instance, relational understandings of place do not make places equal – they may hierarchise them, as we saw in the case of rankings.

The paper also extends existing conceptualisations by exploring non-places in internationalisation. International distance education students at UNISA, our empirical case, also remarked on placelessness, on the transience of place and the mediated character of place in distance higher education. The networks, hierarchies and relations that are part of the spatial arrangements of place make places unique locations (Doreen Massey 1991) but they can also produce non-places. These qualities of place open up new research agendas.

First, COVID-19 shifted higher education into more hybrid forms of learning. Even though COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted some of these hybrid models have continued. Distance education methods and models are therefore likely to play a greater role in international education. In that context, international distance education students’ notions of place will continue to be relevant, but raises substantive new questions. How will international students anticipate and experience place as universities offer hybrid models of education? And how, if at all, will international students affect place from afar? One of the key concerns about the possible decline in international student numbers is that the local economies of university towns hosting such students might decline. What are the productive possibilities and politics of place-making among international students if universities adopt hybrid models of learning and teaching?

Secondly, internationalisation is not only a business venture but also a way of improving access to quality education for countries that have inadequate or unstable provision (Gunter et al., forthcoming). Distance education can provide such access more cheaply than other forms of international education. Should educational access only be targeted towards people in that country or location, or should universities become locales that offer education to those with poor access in the region or continent? Should they be seen as locales where the broader mission of education provision is provided in networked and relational ways to a wider population? This questions of who gets to study, the citizen who is in place, or also those who are brought into relation through
networked linkages between places, is an important question. Gunter et al. (forthcoming) argue that this conundrum can only be addressed through thinking of education through a cosmopolitan ethics. We suggest that this ethic is not rooted in place as location but in place as locale.

Thirdly, this paper has conceptualised place primarily through connections, but disconnections are also an important part of internationalisation. For instance, Collins et al. (2014) suggest that disconnections and disjunctures must be seen as shaping internationalisation. Flows of knowledge, institutional investment and of students are interrupted, sometimes stopped or redirected. However, there has been more research (including this paper) on connections than on disconnections as they shape place. Putting together a progressive sense of place in studies of internationalisation that keeps disconnections at its heart is a journey which few have taken. We have taken some steps towards this through our interventions around non-place, but this is an area that needs more work.

Finally, conceptualisations of place are becoming particularly important as decolonisation agendas gain influence within academia. These are significant in Africa as different schools, politics and practices of decolonisation are being debated and tested (Becker 2017; Zembylas 2018). Decolonisation is often confused with localisation and with place-based politics. These can sometimes reiterate a more defensive, exclusive version of place that excludes those who are not from that place. Local students and places become valorised as sites of resistance against coloniality and its aftermaths. For instance, local students fighting for a place to study might become protective about how far international students take up precious university places as these are seen as a place-based right. Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter (2020) show how even progressive politics around #Feesmustfall, are based around nationalist projects, even though national boundaries and epistemic injustice are both colonial legacies. Thus, place appears in silent and problematic ways even in progressive politics, such as in the decolonisation agenda. Adopting a less-bounded sense of place – recognising how it is put together through networks, hierarchies and through the relational character of place will open up new visions of place and how the politics of place should be assembled. Importantly, these ways of thinking through place are important for wider research on internationalisation and the ways in which students, teachers, policy makers and others emplace these processes.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, due to constraints of space, the paper is unable to cover the wealth of literature on internationalisation and place. Rather, a thematic review focusing on some of the key ideas has been offered.
2. Space-time is a way of conceptualising space and time together. Massey (1999) argues that this approach enables entities to be conceptualised as existing within four-dimensions – three of time and one of space – simultaneously.
3. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries include 16 members: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
5. The project obtained ethical clearance from both The Open University and UNISA. The project was reviewed by the ethics committees and all issues raised were addressed before the project commenced.
6. This was necessitated because the researchers moved on to academic careers, part way through the project. All the interviews presented here was done by a UK-based researcher and one of the co-authors of this paper. The authorship of this paper reflects both the successful career trajectories of the previous researchers and the resultant data collection procedures. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted via Skype to Skype (audio only) or Skype to phone. During the semi-structured interviews students were encouraged to reflect on diverse issues around migration intentions, social media use and education. This paper draws on topics that students themselves introduced into the interviews.
7. These regional centres are located in the following cities: East London (Eastern Cape), Johannesburg (Gauteng), Durban (KwaZulu-Natal), Polokwane (North Eastern), Rustenburg (Midlands) and Parow (Western Cape). Additionally, UNISA’s outreach work in Ethiopia means that they also have an office in Addis Ababa.
8. This course enables students to learn the legal aspects of running a company, including aspects such as tax.
9. We have retained the speech of the student exactly in order to allow the students’ own voices to be heard.
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Ethics

The project was given approval by the University of South African research permission sub-committee of the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (Ref #: 2017_RPSC_004), the College of Agriculture and Environmental Science Ethics Committee (Ref #: CAES: 2016_CAES_105) and the Open University UK Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref #: HREC/2016/2268/Raghuram).

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