New work, old power: inequities within the labor of internationalization

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim in this paper is to extend Dorothy Smith’s conceptual understanding of work to consider the emerging labor of “knowmads” within internationalization of higher education. Through original research on everyday experiences of internationalization, the authors seek to illuminate the ways individuals develop skills and competencies in relation to these new forms of work in order to address the reproduction of inequities. The authors make a connection between internationalization of higher education and knowmadic labor based on the premise that cross-border education is often pursued in order to develop knowmadic attributes.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a critical institutional ethnography of one mid-sized Canadian university, the paper uses survey and interview data gathered from students and faculty – individuals who are involved in knowmadic labor connected to internationalization – to illustrate some of the study participants’ daily experiences of internationalization coordinated by the institutional structures of the university in times of globalization.

Findings – It is concluded that internationalization and connecting new forms of work involved in becoming and producing knowmads not only bypass and disregard present inequities in higher education, but work to reproduce them in new ways.

Practical implications – The paper provides insight in regards to processes and allocation of work within internationalization, while addressing forms of social inequities that often cut across these practices and concludes with brief comments on the implications of academic knowmadic labor in Western higher education institutions engaged in internationalization.

Originality/value – While research has been conducted on work in international contexts, little has addressed “the labor” that is involved in becoming knowmads, and that of “producing” knowmads. The paper draws connections between the internationalization of higher education and knowmadic work showing that knowmadic labor is often preceded by knowmadic educational opportunities. The cosmopolitan vision of creating globally aware citizens, with international knowledge, skills, and competencies that institutions espouse, are assumed to be good per se, and to lead to knowmadic qualities and attributes required in a knowmad society. The paper questions these assumptions and the relations of power on which they rest.

Keywords Knowmads, Work, Inequity, Internationalization of higher education, Globalization, Intercultural literacies, Society, Education

Paper type Research paper

We live in an era where globalization is impacting almost every aspect of human existence. We are witnessing an unprecedented escalation of human mobility, from one extreme of refugee populations displaced by war, natural disasters, conflict, to transnational migration of people in search of better working and living conditions, to travelers of business and pleasure. In higher education, academic mobility is increasing and intensifying significantly (Altbach and Teichler, 2001), resulting in globally oriented programming, changing methods of delivery, a growing use of technology, and transnational research and teaching partnerships. We enter the conversation by taking up the notion of “knowmad” as a new kind of sojourner in the context of the internationalizing university.
The term “knowmad”, according to its originator John Moravec (2008, 2012), describes nomadic knowledge and innovation workers who can work with almost anybody, anytime, and anywhere. Scholars have taken up the notion of knowmads variously, with some connecting knowmadism strongly to the virtual world, such as the role of social media, and others viewing knowmadism as entailing transnational and transcultural work (Adler and Adler, 2008; Al-Zobaidi, 2009; Kakihara et al., 2005; Kaplan, 2002; Makimoto and Manners, 1997; Standing, 2009). The theme that this special issue attempts to explore is the role of education and learning organizations in developing and supporting borderless knowmads, the emerging knowmadic society, and the converging future of learning and work. Questioning the premises of mainstream education, Moravec (2012) argues that a knowmadic society necessitates the transformation of currently widespread “banking” (Freire, 2000) paradigms and pedagogies that continue to create factory workers and bureaucrats, towards modes that allow for open access to information and the tools for creating socially-meaningful knowledge. Our paper addresses these issues regarding change in higher education by examining the kinds of labor that are involved in developing knowmads who wish to enter the world of transnational and transcultural work.

Given the widely shared perspective that the primary purpose of internationalization is the preparation of graduates with intercultural and international literacies (Häyrinen-Alestalo and Peitola, 2006; Knight, 2004; Leask, 2010), the focus of our discussion will be the creation and re-creation of academic knowmads with these qualities. In other words, the internationalization of higher education, purported to help students become global citizens and function in the new knowledge and knomadic society, is aligned with the goals of knowmadism. While these goals appear to be in keeping with new shifts in work and education, we are seeing that the creation of a knowmadic society also has some unintended consequences. Through the experiences of individuals who are involved in knowmadic labor connected to internationalization, we will argue that internationalization of higher education creates new forms of work in the academy, which not only bypass and disregard inequities, but reproduces them in new ways. Furthermore, we assert that our discussion can enhance new and emerging conceptualizations of the knowmad phenomenon, while beginning to address the lack of research on work/labor within processes of internationalization in higher education.

We will first use selected literature to articulate a theoretical position on the notion of the knowmad, and consider how these works connect with the internationalization of higher education. We will refer particularly to matters of inequity. Our framework is informed by Dorothy Smith’s notions of labor, a feminist perspective which provides a broader understanding of the activities that constitute work. We situate these theoretical discussions of the knowmad in the context of internationalization of higher education using preliminary data from a study on experiences of internationalization in a Canadian university. We conclude with brief comments on the implications of academic knowmadic labor in western higher education institutions engaged in internationalization.

**Knowmads, work, and the internationalizing university**

Globalization, commonly recognized as a complex phenomenon involving advances in technology, communication, media and social media connectivity, is often viewed as having a positive impact on our lives. Yet, many sound analyses of economic globalization lay bare a grim picture: mass consumption, environmental degradation, the drive for profit, the business of development, food scarcity, and financial crises are all connected to the exacerbation of inequities (Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010). In this paper, we will explore select intersections of globalization, higher education, and the internationalization of higher education to illustrate inequities in the labor activities of knowmads in academia.

There is widespread acceptance that economic globalization has resulted in the commodification or marketization of higher education (Marginson, 2004; Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010). As Stier (2004) argues, an instrumental ideology has created a strong connection between education and economic growth, where the economic prowess of a country is consolidated through a labor force that is positioned to be competitive because of
high education levels, intercultural skills, and flexibility to function in a complex global environment. Accordingly, higher education has become a commodity, positioning universities to be competitive in the global market place, vying for the business of students and faculty, and maximizing revenue for their institutions. Unterhalter and Carpentier (2010) argue that the consequences arising in this context are consistent with the inequities imposed by globalization where economics trump social and public good. In particular they ask: “How can we hold together aspirations for economic growth, equity, democracy and sustainability’ within global higher education? Their work offers an important perspective in highlighting equity along with democracy and sustainability as being equally if not more important than the economic ends.

Moravec’s (2008) response to changing conditions in times of globalization lies in understanding the knowledge economy. According to him:

> The convergence of globalization, the emergence of the knowledge society, and accelerating change contribute to what might be best termed a new paradigm of knowledge production in higher education. The new paradigm reflects the emerging shifts in thought, beliefs, priorities and practice in regard to education in society (p. 123).

Drawing on Drucker’s (1993, 2001) work, Moravec argues that these conditions entail the development of certain individual characteristics or attributes that constitute a knowmad, including, for example, the attainment of personal, organizational, and global knowledge, as well as an understanding of multiple forms and flows of information. Navigating these changing paradigms is often a creative, innovative, and imaginative endeavour; the knowmad moves, either physically or assisted by technology, in an international context, communicating and working with people from a vast array of cultures and places. The new possibilities for work that arise through globalization demand individuals to quickly adapt to social change, reconfigure work, and rapidly acquire necessary skills. The notions of “knowmad” and the “knowmad society” thus offered as conceptual possibilities for functioning in the new knowledge society are mostly seen as ideals to strive for in globalizing conditions.

While these developments may be taken as evidence of innovation and creativity in how higher education is responding to global change, tensions and unintended consequences are apparent. Naidoo (2010), for example, challenges the so-called neutrality of the knowledge society arguing that the knowledge economy is closely tied to competition and issues of access and exclusivity. Naidoo’s critique is useful to our present discussion in challenging the inevitability of the knowmad society, and the idea that such a society is good per se. Indeed, mobility, a key feature of the internationalization of higher education and the knowmad society, reflects inequitable participation. As Unterhalter and Carpentier (2010) illustrate, those areas with the highest rates of poverty in the world account for the smallest proportions of mobile students, begging the question of who has access to, and who is becoming part of, the knowmadic society.

There are further hidden implications about the so-called facilitation of the globalization of knowledge valorized by Moravec such as offshore and franchise activities of universities that can be understood as increasing inequity-enhancing activities, cultural imperialism, and what gets valued and counted as important knowledge in the new order. Importantly, whose global knowledge is being facilitated under such conditions? While these discussions have presented some of the limitations of moving towards a knowmad society, the particular aspect that interests us relates to the invisible and visible forms of work incurred in both becoming a knowmad, and producing knowmads. In the research we have been carrying out in the past few years, we have been particularly interested in the experiences of those players on the academic stage of knowmadism, where we are seeing how the labor of internationalization is enacted.

The concept of “work” through Dorothy Smith’s (1987, 1999) conceptual understanding of the term usefully re-frames the labor of “knowmads” within internationalization. Smith offers a lens for considering how the social world is organized differently for those who face inequities, and how these groups must contend with standard frames of reference that
organize everyday experiences. Social inquiry focusing on these experiences considers the "[...] world known immediately and directed in the bodily mode" (Smith, 1987, p. 81). The bodily existence of an individual involved in becoming a knowmad or producing knowmads becomes the focus of our research, as these individuals move into new settings that reorganize their activity. In these settings, what constitutes work is coordinated through text and institutional structures, forming text-mediated relations that position individuals unequally. Positive rhetoric surrounding internationalization results in higher-education institutions developing international programs and practices often overlooking inequitable impacts such as disproportionate time and efforts expended by participants in such activities with limited institutional support. In this framework, work is understood as the way in which individuals conduct their everyday lives, expertly managing and coordinating their activity in relation to institutionalized internationalization. As a critical perspective, our understanding focuses on how work is enforced and governed by institutional constraints in academia. Thus, knowmadic labor is researched not simply for what it constitutes, but for how it is shaped and produced by institutions.

Within internationalization, activity is often assumed to provide intercultural literacy either by interactions with culturally different others, the curriculum, or by learning in a foreign place. As individuals and groups move between and interact with a range of communities, they must learn strategies to mediate between cultures (Honna, 2005; Pegrum, 2008; Phipps and St Clair, 2008a, b). This form of intercultural literacy is a necessary skill for knowmadic labor. However, this skill is often mediated by institutions that frame the term in specific ways, for example, assuming fairly effortless use of the English language. Importantly, as our data illustrates, the work of gaining intercultural literacies varies considerably between and within different groups in academia. This is impacted by the way in which institutions provide specific opportunities for the development of intercultural literacies through internationalization, and the unattended labor often required of individuals to gain skills and attributes in order to navigate intuitional demands and constraints. Knowmadic work must be understood not simply in terms of the choices individuals make, but also in relation to the ways in which institutions coordinate labor. As Smith (1999) writes "[...] objectifying discourses operate to coordinate people's diversities of experience, perspective, and interest into a unified frame at the institutional level. They may indeed be constitutive of what we mean by 'institutions'" (p. 196). Thus, it is essential to consider the work of intercultural literacy and the institutional production of this labor as an indissoluble element of the production of knowmads. We now turn to data from an ongoing study in a Canadian university to illustrate the kinds of work that becoming and producing knowmads entails.

Illustrations from the field

The setting for our study is a mid-sized university in Canada that has been engaged in international activities and programs for over twenty years, including study abroad programs for domestic students, recruitment of international students, student and faculty exchanges with foreign institutions, and credit and non-credit instructional program delivery and customized education programs for international clients delivered in Canada or overseas. At present, the university serves over 3,700 international students, among whom full time students represent 13.4 percent of the total undergraduate population, and 24.4 percent of the graduate population. The mission of this university includes objectives for internationalization, there are targets for attracting and enrolling international students, and part of the university's marketing of its programs is the promotion of its international profile.

Our study uses a qualitative dominant mixed-method design to generate data from an online survey using forced choice and open-ended questions, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. Survey participants to date include 423 students, 115 faculty members, 42 staff members, and one administrator. We have also conducted interviews with a total of 13 faculty members, five staff members, five administrators, and 47 students (13 graduate and 34 undergraduate). The survey data discussed below is drawn from our pilot study in only one faculty of the university where 125 students and 34 faculty members completed surveys.
Survey responses from other faculties are in early stages of analysis, but reflect similar concerns with reference to the themes discussed in this article. Given space constraints, we will refer here only to a few illustrative examples from qualitative data from surveys and interviews that speak to the labor involved in becoming and producing knowmads in academia and the inequities associated with such labor.

**Becoming a knowmad: the labor of students**

In crossing national borders and pursuing education in a foreign country, international students are aspiring to acquire the skills and knowledge that would move them towards becoming knowmads. While seeking social and personal knowledge and skills that will enable them to work with almost anybody, anytime, and anywhere (attributes of a knowmad), the international students of our study have chosen a difficult and financially heavy pathway of studying abroad to gain skills through individual development that will position them well in the new knowledge society. They work hard to gain institutional support, develop social interactions with the local students, and adapt to the local culture of teaching and learning.

**Studying abroad**

A consistent finding throughout our data on international students is the decision making on studying abroad and the time and effort taken to make those choices. Though knowmadic workers are described by Moravec as people who can work anywhere, our data shows that international students go to specific places for their international education in order to become positioned as a knowmad. For example, Norco, a graduate student in education from Indonesia, came to Canada for “advanced knowledge in a developed country for a broader view” to help his university in Indonesia to “find the best knowledge”. Bernice, a first-year Chinese international student in education, chose to pursue an international education to cultivate “a broader view (and) a broader horizon” in “countries like Canada/America, those developed countries”.

For many of the students, the status of studying in a western, English-speaking country, and professional growth, were the reasons students identified for their decision to study overseas. The perception that western credentials and research were superior to the choices in their countries of origin, evidenced in the words of Norco and Bernice above, and the belief that a western education could position them to get a good job anywhere, weighted their choices of country and institution. However, as Unterhalter and Carpentier (2010) point out, access to knowmadic opportunities seems limited to those who can afford the financial and other costs associated with a foreign education, illustrating that not everyone can aspire to, or become a knowmad.

In preparing to study in a foreign university, undergraduate and graduate students spent much time, effort and energy on researching institutions, contacting them, preparing applications, doing paperwork, passing English exams and prerequisites, and once accepted, making further arrangements such as visas, travel arrangements and finding accommodation. Many struggled with the high fees that international study entailed. For example, Molly, an undergraduate student from China in psychology, commented that the tuition fee for international students was “astronomical”, and she had to give up her favorite major in another university and endure a life that she did not like in order to save money. The inequities reflected in differential tuition fees prompted by universities’ efforts to generate revenue from international students in the context of marketization of higher education have very concrete impacts on the everyday lives of international students striving to gain the cultural capital associated with becoming knowmads:

My parents are both working for the government in China, and they could only afford my education expenditure here. In order to save money in living and eating, I have to live with a relative. I could not choose the major that I loved in [the other university in the city] because it is too far away from my relative’s house. You know it isn’t always pleasant to live with a relative for several years.
Although these experiences stand the students in good stead, laying the foundations for knowmadic skills and literacies later on, there is little or no acknowledgment or even understanding among the students that these hardships are part of the process of acquiring the skills and qualities needed to function as knowmads in the future.

**Unsupported labor**

As evidenced in student data, the labor of acquiring international and intercultural knowledge is not eased by institutional support and is pursued by students as an individual endeavor. Both the quantitative and qualitative data we collected show that there is a lack of support at the institutional level for students engaged in international activities. For example, data from our surveys show only 8 percent of faculty and 16 percent of students felt that international students received adequate support in their faculty. What is more, “[c]reating an adequate learning environment and providing sufficient support services for international students” was ranked as the biggest challenge and issue for integrating an international dimension at the departmental level. Lack of support for international students not only restricts their successful transition and development, but also adds extra work during their sojourn in foreign universities. This extra work to be done by individuals exemplifies how institutional structures are somewhat impermeable to the development of knowmadic qualities among students new to the North American academy.

The following interview excerpt illustrates these issues. Sharalyn, an international graduate student in Psychology, shared her experience of applying for employment insurance (EI) benefits while working part-time for a local school district. After spending quite some time seeking assistance from different sectors in the institution and searching online, Sharalyn ended up withdrawing her application for the EI benefits feeling disappointed: “They never explain anything, I’m not asking for equal treatment with local people, but I just want to get my money paid for my EI. But there’s no support for international students. [The university] website has nothing on how to apply for it or whether it’s qualified.” This example reflects the inequities experienced by these students in accessing resources readily available to domestic students in similar circumstances.

Peer relations are important when international students need help with academic work and emotional support in times of difficulty (Kim, 2012). However, our study evidences that international students struggle to build relationships with domestic students (also see Montgomery, 2010; Trahar, 2011). To do so, some students have to move beyond their “comfort zones” and reduce their connections with people from the same national or ethnic backgrounds. For instance, Am, an international doctoral student from Indonesia, chose to pay higher rent to live with domestic students in order to create opportunities to gain intercultural communication skills. Further, Jenny, a first-year student from Korea, worked hard to build connections with domestic students, even at the expense of losing Korean friends: “I tried several times (to approach local students) […] it was not easy […] I do not think they want to try it. It is too hard to get a friend […] So like in my case I live by myself here […] (as a result) sometimes I feel a little lonely […] But I try not to make some Korean friends here.” These stories illustrate the embodied experience of students who are attempting to move beyond nationally-based support groups and friendships in the interest of gaining intercultural literacies and developing meaningful knowmadic relationships with peers.

Further, respondents to our student survey identified a lack of support for some Canadian study abroad students such as inadequate debriefing after the experience, lack of funding and scholarships for study abroad, and generally a disconnect with putting new found intercultural or international understanding into practice. This leads us to question how such obstacles constrain students seeking to gain knowmadic attributes through individual skill development.

**The intercultural work of knowmads**

International students are constantly engaged in the invisible work of adapting to different educational and social cultures. Laohu, a Chinese undergraduate business student, told us how the failure he experienced would help him achieve his personal goals: “I want to push
myself [. . .] Chinese people always (are) afraid of failing, but here I learn that failure always [. . .] pushes you to be an ideal person. Maybe get a lot of fail but eventually will get there.” Similarly, Emrah, a linguistics PhD candidate from Turkey, explained how he had to adapt culturally and academically to teaching as a sessional instructor:

In order to be a good instructor here, you need to start thinking like Canadian people [. . .] It’s quite challenging [. . .] It’s like a baby learning from scratch [. . .] So do what [students] think, and know they expect you to teach them [. . .] and how they approach the material, handle the material with them [. . .] [In this way] you have learned, and upgraded yourself from different angles.

Smith’s theorizing sheds light on Emrah’s textual mediation of content material. It can be viewed as work undergone by an instructor in order to engage with students transculturally while developing knowmadic qualities in the process. The efforts of Laohu and Emarah to fit in to a new educational setting reflect the invisible individual work that people engage in as they become knowmads in a globalizing world – work that exemplifies the demands of the organizing institutional discourse to adapt quickly.

International students are also subjected to the power relations that manifest with English as the only legitimate language in the classroom. Jennifer, a graduate student in education, reported that her friend from China “was humiliated by her teaching assistant where the teaching assistant actually told her English is horrible in front of the whole class.” This experience reflects what Smith would term the impact of a universalizing discourse to operate in a single language which coordinates linguistic diversity. Another example is Jenny’s unpleasant experience when seeking help to transfer her credits from Korea. She was called a “liar” when a misunderstanding occurred because of her English proficiency, and she did not receive an apology after the misunderstanding was clarified. She felt helpless and accepted this unequal treatment as a reality: “I do not know [how to cope with it] because it is our reality. Even though we are treated that way, we do not know how to deal with it. Maybe just think positively”. The unequal treatment that Jenny received is considered the normal work entailed in living and studying abroad. As Kim (2012) observes, international students’ endurance and acceptance of such negative experiences is in fact their “consent to and participation in” the inequitable power relations (p. 1).

Educational markets impact flows of individuals and groups engaged in international activity in specific ways, affecting the development of knowmads through institutionalized education. As the students of our study often noted, this may take place even where constraints and hardships are present, where individuals of diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds face inequity. Internationalization has substantive effects on the lives of individuals, and supporting students both on-campus and off is often beyond the capacity of the university of our study. Curiously, it is often through recounting these hardships that students voice their desire for self-improvement, hoping to gain attributes that parallel those of knowmadism, from being self-sufficient, to gaining openness and tolerance. These attributes are often evoked when facing specific hardships, constituting the “work” international students are required to undertake, the labor of being involved in internationalization. Indeed, the intercultural capacities of the knowmad are not always learned with ease.

**Producing knowmads: the work of faculty**

While universities are internationalizing with a view to preparing their graduates to be interculturally and internationally literate, we know little about the work of faculty in this process. Our data has uncovered preliminary findings that confirm how faculty members work on their own initiative, do not enjoy institutional support, are concerned about the neoliberal ideologies that drive institutions to embrace internationalization, and query the unintended consequences of such efforts, such as neo-colonial practices.

**Lack of institutional support in working to produce knowmads**

The data from faculty survey responses and interviews reflect a lack of support at the institutional level for internationalization activities which, given rationales for
internationalization (e.g. Knight, 2004), are aimed to produce interculturally and internationally competent individuals – i.e. individuals possessing valued transcultural literacy and knowmadic qualities. The data exemplifies what faculty labor entails and how it is shaped by the institution. For example, the majority of faculty members in one faculty who responded to our survey (58 percent), did not believe that their faculty provided support to instructors on how to use the experience and knowledge of international students or returned Canadian exchange students in their classrooms. The other 42 percent did not know. Such figures shed light on inequities in the facilitation of global knowledge exchange as the transcultural resources of students developing knowmadic qualities who are physically present in university classrooms are ignored. Further, as indicated in the survey comments of one "outside of Canada" student, those implementing internationalization projects may have little institutional support, particularly from their department:

The [University] International Office provides many of the listed supports for field schools. But, the [department] does not provide such supports as a matter of course. It's the responsibility of the [instructor] in [a teacher preparation program offering practicum at an international site] to do most of those things (i.e. the [instructor] doesn't have much support for themselves, while they’re trying to provide support to the students).

Some of the kinds of support needed to nurture knowmadism are reflected in the following survey response:

The [department] needs to have someone in the office who can take special interest and care in the issues and concerns of students who leave Canada. It’s too much for the instructor to take responsibility for this alone.

As is evident from these data, the ability to “internationalize” and thus work towards the production of knowmads in a globalized world, seems to reside within the individual instructor rather than the broader department. Without institutional support, the practice necessarily involves extra work for individual members of a given faculty. As not all faculty members involved in internationalization activities are willing to put in the extra work or are equipped to address the complex needs of students navigating transcultural literacies, the result is inconsistencies in student experiences and ad-hoc programming thus limiting possibilities to develop knowmadic qualities.

As one staff member commented when providing examples of the most successful and innovative internationalization activity(ies) in one faculty, “Individual students [offer] testimony about the impact of experiencing a shift in their understanding based on an [international] experience they have had […] but all depends on the teaching style and cultural awareness of the instructor.” Overall, there is a lack of systematic engagement with internationalization beyond pockets of activity which invokes inequitable access to international/intercultural experience and literacies, reduced impact on the community, and unsustainable practices of locating “internationalization” within individuals. In that sense, internationalization has a very personal impact on given individuals entailing additional labor for them.

**Lack of institutional recognition of additional labor for faculty**

The lack of support for faculty labor is also often linked to lack of recognition of its significance by hierarchically more powerful institutional entities. One survey respondent made the case that “people working in international contexts with students […] need a strong line of support and communication […] they need to feel confident that their issues and concerns are understood by someone in a leadership position […]”. This comment reflects an awareness of potentially unresponsive and rigid institutional structures that coordinate and organize the activities of faculty members engaged in educational endeavors aiming to produce knowmads.

Further lack of recognition of the labor of faculty members engaged in international work seemed to result in inequities with regards to evaluating their academic activities through the tenure process. As one faculty respondent appealed:
Acknowledge international work in faculty members’ workloads. Do something to show that these extra efforts are valued and appreciated [. . .] The people who get the credit are the ones who get the grants and publications, while there are few rewards for the people who actually do the work and carry an international project through to completion.

A powerful example of the details of laboring to bring international work to fruition and the demand for recognition of the importance of developing knowmadic competencies is evident in an interview with one faculty member who became involved in a long-term project for science curriculum development for a consortium of eleven universities in Vietnam. Here is his account of this process:

As the project developed [. . .] the people who were part of the group initially sort of drifted away [. . .] I was a junior faculty at the time and [. . .] ended up taking a lot of the weight of the project on my own shoulders [. . .] I found myself canvassing senior administrator’s offices in Vietnam where there would be a new rollover to inform [them] about the project [. . .] Because I was adamant that they needed to know [that their faculty members involved in the project] needed to be nourished, they needed to be cared for in a particular way because of the kinds of experience that they had [. . .] Then the same thing occurred here with our turnover of senior administrators. I found myself knocking on their doors telling them about this project [. . .] [Through work on the project] my eyes were opened and I became much more. I think, of a global citizen at the time [. . .] And I saw the community in a different way too. I think as a result I came to see communities in terms of what I call gradients of developing competencies and understandings and abilities.

This account is an example of the excessive work necessitated to recognize and appreciate knowmadic qualities – work that involves developing knowmadic competencies to work with anyone anywhere and reflects seeking institutional accountability for internationalization activities.

**Knowmadism, global inequities, and labor**

While not discussed extensively in either student or faculty data, there is an undercurrent in both sets of data that speaks to the dangers of perpetuating existing global inequities when developing knowmadic qualities. For example, some faculty pointed to the racial and colonial power imbalance that can be reinforced in international activities, linking this to continuing relations of power between people of color and well-meaning whites. One faculty member expressed the following concern:

Who benefits from study abroad? Students from this Canadian university speak of it being “life changing” – but isn’t this just once again “the work of people of colour being there for the enlightenment of white folks” [but] organized now in a global context rather than within the nation state?

In this perspective, white people re-instate themselves again as central, with people of color serving them by engaging in transcultural work that entails educating them about what it is like to be “not white” (e.g. Collins, 2000). This faculty member levels this deep critique at internationalization and study abroad programs in particular, pointing to the cultural dominance that can continue despite goals to the contrary. As is evident from the data discussed above, this dominance seems to accompany many processes that surround producing or becoming a knowmad.

**Some closing thoughts**

In this paper, we have made connections between the internationalization of higher education, whose rationales and goals are aimed towards the development of intercultural and international skills and knowledges, and the notion of knowmadism (or knowmad labor), which relates to the knowledge society and transnational work. We have argued that internationalization is rationalized by institutions as an educational strategy to promote and cultivate qualities needed to live and work in a globalizing world, a description also used to conceptualize the knowmad. We have used Smith’s concept of work to reframe the emerging labor of knowmads in the process of internationalization. The everyday experiences of internationalization of students and faculty discussed above illustrate the ways individuals are engaged in new forms of work to develop or support knowmadic skills, literacies, and
competencies and in the process reproduce relations of inequality. Through internationalization student mobility is facilitated, international programs are formed, and knomadic qualities are developed; yet, doing so without fully considering the inequalities intrinsic to these activities overlooks important misgivings to viewing knowmadism solely in positive terms.

We contend that our research addresses how seemingly new practices around the internationalization of higher education linked to the production of knowmads are formed within institutional constraints guided by economic, monolingual and monocultural imperatives. This study thus enhances new and emerging conceptualizations of the “knowmad” phenomenon. More specifically, this discussion implicates academic knowmadic labor and questions the ideals of a knowmad society. As Moravec (2012) maintains, while students in an emergent knowmad society should learn, work, share and play in almost any configuration, there is little evidence in our study to support the claim that educational structures are moving in that direction. As we show in this paper, addressing how knowmadic work is constrained involves exposing how it is formed by institutions. While institutions may appear to adopt knowmadic ideals, those ideals are not simply unrealized, but severely constrained by institutional practices. Within our data this is seen in multiple ways, from offering limited forms of support for knowmadic activity, to framing institutional accountability and social relations in specific ways. Lastly, if we are to research the development of knowmads, we must research the embodied practices through which this term gains efficacy. Knowmadic labor must be understood as taking place within space and time, and thus as being constrained by the institutions that form it. This has the often unintended effect of perpetuating inequities and limiting access to and distribution of global knowledge in the process.

This preliminary inquiry has left us with the issue of the role of higher education institutions in relation to educating workers of the future. Higher education institutions not only need to address how they are serving diverse groups of students, and how they are preparing them for the new conditions of work, but the more fundamental issue of whether they support the goals of producing knowmads. If they do, there must be changes in creating explicit support for students in their learning, and faculty members in their work. More importantly, we return to the question articulated by Unterhalter and Carpentier (2010) regarding the holding together of sometimes competing aspirations for higher education. The pursuit of the development of knowmads in a knowledge society is very much tied in to economic and instrumental ends, and must be tempered by considerations of sustainability, democracy and equity in order to serve the widest public good.

References


Further reading


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