



The global university reimagined: a post-qualitative study of space and place in English higher education

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Abstract

In recent years, the idea of the global university has become a powerful yet under-theorised ideal in higher education. Universities are urged to pursue global engagement -across student and faculty bodies, research, teaching, and partnerships - yet what it means to be global is rarely questioned. In a market-driven environment, “global” status is largely assigned to research-intensive institutions via league tables, narrowing its meaning and obscuring its complexity. This study challenges such assumptions by rethinking how universities become global, rather than accepting globality as an institutional status.

It argues that globality is made and remade through the everyday rhythms, negotiations, and frictions of academic life. The research aims to recover the agency of universities - and the people and practices within them - in shaping their global condition.

Grounded in the premise that both globalisation and space are relationally produced through ongoing interactions among people, practices, technologies, and places, this study contends that the global is not imposed from outside but generated within and through the local - via the specific ways universities engage wider flows of knowledge, people, and ideas. This situates the global within the everyday spaces and practices of English universities.

Drawing on Doreen Massey’s theory of relational space and grounded in post-qualitative and new materialist approaches that treat inquiry as emergent and understand knowledge as produced in practice rather than discovered, the thesis undertakes a multi-sited inquiry across three contrasting English universities.

It uses diffractive analysis, an approach that reads interview materials through theory to trace how differences are produced and with what effects—rather than reducing accounts to themes. Guided by Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action and a concepts-as-method orientation, the study examines how “global university” identities are materially and discursively enacted in specific institutional contexts through online interviews with individuals occupying diverse roles.

In this way, the thesis re-theorises the global university as an emergent, situated process. It contributes methodological innovation by operationalising relational spatial theory through post-qualitative inquiry and offers new insights into how global imaginaries are produced and lived in local university spaces - inviting more reflexive, relational approaches to global engagement in higher education.

1 Introduction Chapter

The concept of the global university has become a widespread ideal in discussions of higher education. It is often embraced by institutional strategies, government policies, and international rankings, symbolising excellence and relevance across borders. In response, a growing number of universities have increasingly branded themselves as 'global' institutions. In policy rhetoric and strategic visioning, international reach and cross-border ambition are treated as essential attributes of successful institutions (Stevens & Giebel, 2020). Despite its widespread use and symbolic significance, the idea of the global university remains notably underexplored.

Rather than a grounded analytic construct, “the global university” circulates largely as a rhetorical device. It is frequently conflated with adjacent ideas such as internationalisation, globalisation, or transnational competitiveness (Lomer et al., 2023). Mission statements speak of global impact; branch campuses and networks span continents; competition in international rankings is now routine. Indeed, “no university of ambition officially claims to be local,” as having a global reputation has become “nearly essential” for institutional prestige (Stevens & Giebel, 2020, p. 123). At the same time, scholars caution that the claim to global status is inherently paradoxical. Universities are deeply embedded in particular places, cities, regions, and national systems, and one of their longstanding functions has been to link local knowledge to broader world affairs. Yet, they also participate in emerging global fields of activity, including cross-border research networks and ranking systems that abstract them from locality (Marginson, 2022b).

This duality suggests that the global university is not merely a branding strategy, but a complex and contested imaginary. It reflects broader globalisation processes and institutional power relations, while simultaneously obscuring questions of spatial context, epistemic identity, and institutional becoming. These tensions have intensified due to recent global disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis, geopolitical volatility, and rapid digital transformation, emphasising the urgent need for a more rigorous conceptual framework.

What does it actually mean for a university to be global? While the idea of the global university has become pervasive in higher education policy, branding, and discourse, its meaning remains underexamined. Dominant narratives tend to equate global character of universities with metrics, rankings, and elite institutional status, offering a static and surface-level account. What remains insufficiently explored is how the global is made in the everyday, particularly, what spaces, practices, and relations produce it, and with what material, affective, and institutional consequences.

This thesis argues that the global university is not a fixed institutional type or status but an emergent, relational formation. It is continually made and remade through the interactions of mundane practices, spatial negotiations, and technological infrastructures that constitute academic life. By foregrounding space as a constitutive dimension of globalisation - rather than treating the global as an external force acting on universities - the thesis recovers the agency of universities in shaping globalisation from within.

Building on Massey's (2005) relational theory of space, I conceptualise the global university as a spatial imaginary enacted through the dynamic entanglements of people, places, ideas, and infrastructures. This approach allows me to situate the global in the everyday life of universities, where transnational engagements are negotiated in classrooms, online meetings, timetables, and institutional calendars. Globalisation here is not something "out there," but something lived, contested, and materially produced by the people making it up.

This argument matters now because globalisation in higher education is at a crossroads. Geopolitical shifts, digital transformation, and growing critiques of metric-driven internationalisation demand a deeper understanding of how global imaginaries are made and who gets to participate in them. By tracing how global university is enacted on the ground, inside the local, this thesis offers a more grounded and plural account of global engagement.

Methodologically, the study draws on post-qualitative inquiry, new materialist thinking, and Massey's spatial theory to conduct a multi-sited ethnographic investigation across three English universities. I use diffractive analysis, informed by Barad's concept of intra-action, to examine how global is produced through material, affective, and discursive relations. This research advances three key interventions. Theoretically, it re-theorises the global university as a spatial and relational process constituted through ongoing practices, connections, and assemblages rather than as a fixed institutional identity. The second intervention is empirical, providing situated accounts of how global imaginaries are enacted within the everyday operations of

English universities, with attention to the organisational settings through which imaginaries are translated into routine decisions and actions. The third intervention is methodological, as this thesis demonstrates how relational and posthuman theories can be integrated into scholarship on global higher education and made operational through innovative qualitative inquiry, enabling analysis of institutional life as an effect of heterogeneous relations among human and nonhuman actors, discourses, and material arrangements.

The remainder of this introduction chapter outlines the key issues motivating the project. It examines the changing meanings of globalisation in higher education, particularly in light of recent planetary crises and digital transformations. It then introduces central concepts, such as the *global imaginary*, *glocalisation*, and the *relational production of space*, through which institutional understandings of global can be approached. I present Massey's framework as a conceptual departure point for theorising the global university and explain how a post-qualitative, new materialist approach enables this inquiry. The chapter then outlines the research aim, key questions, and intended contributions to both higher education research and broader conceptual debates. A roadmap of the thesis structure is provided at the end of the chapter with brief summaries as a guide to the thesis.

Why this research, and why this way?

Before moving into the argument and structure of the thesis, I want to outline the motivation and background to this research, and how the project came into view. This

is not simply an account of “why I chose the topic,” but of how a set of questions slowly formed - through an early research opportunity, through my own movements between places, and through noticing that the idea of the “global university” often travels as an assumption rather than as something carefully examined.

When I first encountered the topic, I was located outside global studies, and even further outside global higher education studies. I did not enter the project already shaped by those debates, and I did not carry a fixed definition of what “global” should mean in universities. In hindsight, that distance mattered. It meant I began from curiosity rather than from allegiance to a particular school of thought, and I had to arrive at definitions of “global,” “university,” and “campus” through the work itself.

The first concrete moment was around 2017, during final year of BA(Hons) in Finance and Business at Bournemouth University. Through a university scheme, supported by the Provost of Global Engagement, I was given the opportunity to work as a research assistant on an open question: what constitutes a “global campus,” and how can one be made? Unlike other roles I had held, this was not built around a tightly specified plan with predetermined outputs. It was exploratory and generative. I was asked to look across strategy documents, physical plans, and everyday practices, and to think about the campus as something that could be deliberately shaped to support “global” ambitions. At that stage, I approached “global” in its more conventional higher education sense - global competitiveness, positioning, reach, and visibility. The immediate puzzle for me was how physical space was being mobilised in that agenda:

buildings, layouts, shared spaces, “international” hubs, and the infrastructures that organise encounters and movement.

As I explored further, I began to see that space was not simply a backdrop to global activity. It was part of how global is and can be produced. This was the point where I started to sense a theoretical link between space and “global,” and to suspect that a spatial perspective could offer alternatives to how global universities are usually understood. Because I was not trained in global higher education, I had to do something basic but difficult: build a coherent meaning of “global” from concepts that did not sit easily together. In higher education discourse, global often appeared as a property often anchored in rankings and reputation. In global studies and human geography, global appeared differently - as relational, historically produced, and made through specific practices and connections. Those two registers felt inconsistent, and that inconsistency became productive. Initially, I wondered whether a spatial lens could help universities achieve global competitiveness more effectively. By the end of that short-term role, I was left with a more challenging thought: perhaps global itself could be re-theorised through space and place, rather than treated as an external status that a university simply attains.

This developing research trajectory connected strongly to my personal one. I am Latvian, and I moved from Latvia to England in 2014 after finishing school. That move matters here not as a dramatic story, but as an orientation. I have never experienced identity as neatly contained in a single national frame. Moving across borders made that clear in practical ways: how quickly you become “foreign” in one setting and “not

foreign enough” in another; how institutions ask you to locate yourself within categories; how belonging is negotiated, not given. Before I had language like “global citizenship,” I already felt drawn to the idea of being a citizen of the world. Very soon, however, I learned that the world is not equally open, and that being “global” is not simply a personal choice - it is shaped by barriers, permissions, and unequal access. Still, I did not want those constraints to define what was possible for me. That tension - between openness as an aspiration and closure as a lived reality - sits underneath much of the thesis.

This became even more significant as my life became more explicitly transnational. I married another immigrant and started a family. In a very ordinary way, we “created that space”: a home, routines, languages, connections, and obligations that do not fit comfortably into a single national narrative. As a result, I have also felt the need to build a vocabulary - first for myself, and then for my son - to hold multiplicity without treating it as confusion or deficit. He will never be only one thing; he will always be more than one thing at once (Latvian/Angolan/British, Black/White). That matters to me because universities often organise identity through fixed categories (home/international, local/global, minority/majority), and those categories can become oppressive when they are treated as natural rather than produced. Part of what sustained this research was a desire to resist those imaginaries—not by romanticising hybridity, but by finding concepts that can recognise multiplicity while still attending to inequality and power.

Some of my comfort with abstraction comes from a much earlier part of my life. Before I had any serious contact with social theory, I was drawn to abstract art and surrealism. I did not experience abstraction as an obstacle; I experienced it as an invitation to think differently. In school, we had to complete small “research projects” each year. One of my earliest attempts at age 12 involved doing a single interview on abstract art. I remember asking about Malevich’s *Black Square*, because the cliché criticism of abstract art (“anyone could paint a black square”) was everywhere. The response I received, simple but powerful, stayed with me: the point was not that it was easy to do; the point was that someone broke through an existing system of sense-making and did it first. That moment shaped how I came to value originality. It also shaped how I think about institutions. I became less interested in excelling within existing norms, and more interested in how norms are made—and how they might be reworked.

This helps explain why the project continued even when my path into academia was not straightforward. I was close to finishing a Finance and Business degree when I encountered these questions, and at that stage my trajectory looked like a corporate career. I chose that degree for practical reasons—independence, stability—but the idea of researching the global university never left. I wanted to pursue it directly after the bachelor’s degree, but structural barriers and personal circumstances made that difficult. I moved away from my first university and into corporate work, and I did not have the networks that often make doctoral study feel accessible. When an initial PhD attempt did not materialise—after receiving reassurance from someone in academia I trusted—I experienced that rejection as both personal and systemic. I had left my job believing I would do the PhD, and I had to rebuild a route forward quickly.

In that timeframe, the realistic alternative was to do a MSc in Education at Bristol University, where I was living, and to use that as both intellectual grounding and a way into an academic community. At the time, I experienced it as a compromise; I later came to value it as formative. It gave me a stronger base in the field I genuinely cared about, and it helped me avoid repeating the earlier mistake of trying to enter doctoral study without support or guidance.

I am particularly grateful to Robin Shields, who helped me with proposal development and, equally importantly, gave honest advice about the logistics of applying. He encouraged me to apply widely and pragmatically, not to rely on single institution as the only chance. That advice also modelled something I later came to value conceptually: agency within a competitive system—finding ways to rework the dynamics rather than simply accepting them. He also suggested Simon Marginson as a supervisor and treated Oxford as a real option. I initially struggled to imagine that possibility. I had critiqued elite institutions in earlier work, and I also assumed they were “not for people like me.” In hindsight, that assumption was itself part of the neoliberal and exclusive global imaginary this thesis critiques: the sense that some spaces are naturally distant and unreachable. The move toward Oxford became, in my own life, a small example of what the thesis argues more generally—that universities are deeply networked, and that relations can be where the seemingly fixed hierarchies begin to shift.

I did not secure funding, and the financial reality of doctoral study has been significant. I took out loans to continue. I sometimes worry about what the “rational”

choice would have been, especially now that I have a family and responsibilities. Yet I also know why I stayed with this project. It has been driven by genuine curiosity and by the need to make sense of what “global” does—how it shapes university life, how it distributes value and visibility, and how it can be rethought through space, relation, and practice. The work matters to me because it offers a way of seeing that is not confined to prestige measures or abstract agendas. It begins from the everyday, from lived spatial arrangements, and from the possibility that different vocabularies can open different futures.

1.1 The ‘Global University’ in Discourse and Practice

Over the past two decades, the term *global university* has gained prominence across higher education discourse, yet it remains conceptually underdeveloped. Most commonly, it appears in strategic language: universities describe themselves as “world-leading,” “globally engaged,” or “internationally excellent,” and pursue this vision through international student recruitment, research networks, global branding, and branch campuses. In the UK context, this global orientation is both institutional and political, with national policy frameworks incentivising international competitiveness and positioning universities as vehicles for global influence (Education, 2021; UKRI, 2022).

Scholarly literature reflects this discursive expansion but has largely examined discrete components, namely, internationalisation strategies (Knight, 2013; Tight, 2022), global

rankings (Hazelkorn, 2016), student mobility (Bamberger & Morris, 2024; Brooks & Waters, 2011), and transnational education (Tran et al., 2023; Wilkins, 2021). These strands often treat globalisation as an external pressure or strategic imperative, rarely interrogating how the global university is imagined, contested, or spatially enacted.

Several critics have highlighted the limitations of these framings. Marginson (2011, 2022) questions the dominance of Anglo-American models in shaping global imaginaries. Others have pointed to the homogenising effects of rankings and policy transfers (Diogo et al., 2022; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2017). Yet few studies explore what it means to be global, particularly how it is actually *made* through localised university practices or how it materialises through everyday institutional life.

This thesis builds on these debates by shifting the focus from outcomes to enactments, from the global university as a measurable category to a process shaped by space, relation, and material practice.

1.2 Globalisation and Higher Education Today

To understand the global university, it is necessary to situate it within wider processes of globalisation. Globalisation can be described as the growing density and reach of cross-border interdependencies that reorganise economic, political, cultural, and technological life. Globalisation theory has long grappled with questions of space, scale, and connectivity. It is now widely understood that globalisation is “inherently geographical” – a set of processes that reorganise social relations across distance and reconfigure the significance of place (Held & McGrew, 2000). Early accounts framed this reorganisation through concepts such as time–space compression, which describes

how advances in transport, communication, and finance “shrink” the world by accelerating interactions and weakening traditional spatial barriers (Harvey, 1989; Giddens, 1990). As transnational linkages intensified in the late 20th century, scholars adopted multi-scalar analyses to show how the local, national, regional, and global become interwoven rather than neatly nested levels (Brenner, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2004; Coe et al., 2008). Rather than treating the nation-state as the natural container of society, research mapped flows of capital, people, information, and cultural symbols that connect distant locales into uneven but interdependent networks. In short, what many early works sought to capture was the compression of space and time – the sense that globalisation was making the world feel smaller, faster, and more tightly coupled. It is not simply an increase in international connections, but a set of uneven and contested processes through which relations are stretched across distance, coordinated through infrastructures and governance arrangements, and experienced through shifting senses of proximity and scale. In this sense, globalisation is best understood as a socio-spatial reconfiguration that simultaneously enables new forms of connection while reproducing differential capacities to participate in, benefit from, and control those connections.

Building on this spatial understanding, scholars have increasingly emphasised the imaginative dimensions of globalisation. Appadurai’s work is particularly influential here, shifting attention from globalisation as a singular, homogenising force to a landscape of overlapping and disjunctive “-scapes” (ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes) through which global flows are imagined, mediated, and unevenly experienced. Importantly, Appadurai conceptualises the

global imaginary as something produced in situated practices—through aspirations, comparisons, and projections that link local actors to distant others. This framing destabilises linear or hierarchical notions of global–local relations and instead foregrounds how globalisation is lived, interpreted, and enacted differently across places.

Within higher education, globalisation is evident in the expansion of student and academic mobility, transnational education provision, international research collaborations, and the circulation of ideas, policies, and curricula across national contexts. It is also expressed through reputational economies such as global rankings, the rising authority of English-language publication circuits, and the growing role of metrics and audit practices that travel across systems. These dynamics can broaden access to knowledge and intensify intellectual and cultural exchange. At the same time, they do not unfold evenly, and their benefits are distributed asymmetrically.

Globalisation in higher education can deepen stratification between institutions and regions, concentrate resources and recognition in already powerful sites, and intensify competition over funding, talent, and legitimacy. It can also generate political and cultural tensions, for example around mobility regimes, unequal partnerships, and whose knowledges are valued and made globally legible.

Disruptions in recent years underscore the uneven nature of globalisation. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted international student travel and forced a rapid, near-universal shift to online teaching - an approach already established in parts of higher education but never adopted at such scale and pace. This experience exposed the dual nature of global academic networks, revealing both their fragility and

flexibility (OECD, 2021). At the same time, the climate crisis has reinforced the urgent need for international cooperation, while rising political tensions and resurgent nationalism are making global connections harder to sustain.

Technological advancements are also reshaping HE at an exponentially increasing speed. Digital infrastructures such as the internet and online learning platforms and the latest artificial intelligence (AI) tools have created new possibilities for global reach. Students and educators can connect across continents in real time, and knowledge can circulate through open-access databases and virtual conferences. Yet these same technologies pose disruptive questions. AI-driven tools such as ChatGPT, launched in 2022, challenge traditional models of teaching and authorship, raising debates about academic integrity and the global diffusion of knowledge (Lin et al., 2024). Meanwhile, digital divides continue to exist as not all institutions or learners have equal access to advanced technologies, reinforcing global inequalities.

At the same time, the current geopolitical climate affects universities' global operations. Brexit and rising nationalism have led some policymakers to question "academic globalism," emphasising instead national sovereignty and local knowledge (de Wit & Jones, 2022). Trade disputes and restrictions on international collaborations (e.g. U.S.-China tensions over technology and research) also impact how universities interact globally. Western countries have exhibited "nativist stabilisation of space," in which simplistic narratives of national identity resist the fluidity of global connections (Marginson, 2025, p. 30). For universities, this means the ideal of an open, cosmopolitan academic community is under pressure from forces of fragmentation and backlash.

These broader shifts make clear that globalisation is not a uniform process; it is experienced differently by different actors and places. Critics point out that globalisation in higher education has often followed patterns of older imperial hierarchies. For example, English-language institutions and Western curricula remain privileged in global knowledge networks, perpetuating what some describe as a new form of cultural and linguistic imperialism. At the same time, many universities in Asia, Latin America and Africa are asserting their own vision of global engagement, challenging Western dominance in world-class rankings and research agendas. The result is a multipolar academic world in flux, where the idea of the global university is contested and uneven. Clearly, universities cannot ignore world demands and must adapt whilst also serving national interests and local communities. Increasingly, universities are expected to balance responding to national priorities and local needs, while also addressing urgent global issues such as sustainability, public health, and social inequality.

The idea of a connected academic world can no longer be taken for granted. These disruptions have also opened up space to imagine new ways of organising universities from the ground up, thus, foregrounding more relational, situated, and equitable forms of global engagement.

1.3 A Relational Perspective: Space and Place

In response, subsequent waves of globalisation theory placed far greater emphasis on relational and place-based understandings of global change. Geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists demonstrated that globalisation does not unfold in a uniform, placeless space, but through networks that link particular locales and through social relations embedded in concrete contexts (Amin, 2002; Coe et al., 2008; Massey, 1994). Massey and others argued that global space is always mediated through particular places, social power relations, and histories (Massey, 2005). By the 2000s, globalisation theory had taken what Steger and James (2019) describe as a “complexity turn,” embracing more nuanced, context-sensitive understandings of global integration. From this perspective, globalisation is “a changeable and highly contingent set of phenomena” (p.12) that must be studied through close empirical attention to multiple local configurations. Work on global cities and world city networks, for example, highlights how specific urban hubs become central in flows of finance, talent, and information while other regions are marginalised (Sassen, 2004). Similarly, Castells’ (1996) notion of the “space of flows” captures how key functions of the global economy are organised through networked infrastructures and circuits of interaction, rather than by territorial proximity. In this view, global is always relational – it creates new linkages and proximities across space, but simultaneously generates new distinctions, exclusions, and hierarchies. Massey’s relational account of space provides a productive lens through which to rethink the global university. Rather than treating space as a neutral container within which institutional life simply takes place, Massey (1994) conceptualises space as emergent and continually made through relations. Space is

therefore ongoing achievement, assembled through encounters, practices, and connections that are simultaneously material and discursive.

“Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local” (Massey, 1994, p. 27).

This relational view has important implications for how place is understood. A university is not simply located in a place that is already given. Its location is constituted through multiple, intersecting relations that connect it to wider worlds, meaning that the local and the global are not separate scales but co-produced through the same practices. Massey’s concept of power-geometry further clarifies that these relations are structured by unequal capacities to initiate, control, and benefit from connection. Some places and institutions occupy positions that allow them to set agendas, define norms, and attract mobile resources, while others are positioned as receivers, dependents, or sites of extraction. London and the United States, for example, have played outsized roles in shaping dominant neoliberal imaginaries of global space. Universities embedded in these centres often exert disproportionate influence over what counts as legitimate knowledge, excellence, and academic value

within international circuits of publication, ranking, and research collaboration (Marginson, 2025).

From Massey's perspective, "global" is not an intrinsic quality that an institution simply possesses, nor a label that can be attached from the outside. Rather, what is recognised as a university's global character takes shape through the contingent process of making and remaking of connections across time and distance.

An English university's global orientation, for example, may be enacted through international exchange programmes, overseas offices, transnational research projects, and digital platforms that sustain collaboration, teaching, recruitment, and reputational work. From a relational standpoint, these are not peripheral activities that sit alongside a more authentic local core. They are constitutive of the institution itself, because they participate in producing the relations through which the university is organised, governed, and rendered legible as "global".

This reframing also shifts how the campus is conceptualised. From a bounded site that global processes merely pass through it becomes an active locus where these stop and interact in situated ways with administrative practices, pedagogic routines, partnership work, infrastructural arrangements. In this sense, the university can be approached as a node within a broader web of relations, with its spatial character produced through the work of connecting, filtering, translating, and stabilising those relations in particular locales.

This perspective also reworks assumptions about scale. Rather than assuming that the global, national, and local are pre-existing levels that then intersect, Massey's approach

foregrounds how scales are produced through place-based practices and relations.

What comes to count as “global” in a university is made through decisions, infrastructures, and encounters enacted in specific sites, even as they extend beyond them. National policy frameworks, community relations, funding regimes, digital systems, and embodied experiences do not simply converge at the university. They are actively composed there, and the university becomes one of the locales through which “the global” is materialised, negotiated, and made meaningful.

Massey’s notion of space emphasises contingency and politics. Space is open and dynamic, there are always new connections that create new opportunities (and new exclusions), and no spatial configuration is ever final. This resonates with contexts of the study: the global university today is highly contingent on shifting technological capacities (e.g. online learning), political arrangements (e.g. visa policies), and social values (e.g. decolonial critiques). By treating space as relational, we also foreground how inequalities shape the global university. Not all universities enter global networks on equal footing. Some agents have the means and privilege to move and connect widely, while others remain marginalised. Massey’s approach makes such power relations visible in spatial terms, it prompts questions of which voices and routes shape the “space” of global higher education, and which places or people are peripheral or silenced.

In sum, a Massey-inspired spatial lens opens up new questions: How do material elements (buildings, technologies, regulatory frameworks) and imaginations (narratives of excellence, visions of internationalisation) interact to co-produce a university’s global presence? How do local practices (pedagogy, governance,

community engagement) get woven into global trajectories? And how might acknowledging place and history change our sense of what “global” really means? By foregrounding these questions, I propose to re-theorise the global university not as an object but as a phenomenon of space-place – a continuous process of negotiation and making of relations.

1.4 Why Re-theorise the Global University, and Why Now?

This spatial and relational re-theorisation feels both timely and necessary. Over the past two decades, the internationalisation of higher education has gathered pace, but not without turbulence. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed how reliant universities have become on international mobility, prompting a sudden shift to virtual forms of global teaching and connection. At the same time, growing concerns about climate change, digital surveillance, data sovereignty, and rising geopolitical tensions have begun to unsettle the idea of a smooth, borderless academic world. Even as the promises of liberal internationalism falter, universities continue to promote “global” strategies, yet the gap between these ambitions and the realities they face is becoming harder to ignore.

Moreover, pressing global problems make the stakes clear. Universities are expected to address challenges like pandemics, environmental collapse, and social injustice, problems that cross borders and require global collaboration. If the idea of a global university is inadequately theorised, we risk repeating old patterns (reproducing hierarchies, exporting unsustainable models, alienating local needs). By contrast, a

relational spatial understanding could reveal new possibilities. For instance, recognising how knowledge networks crisscross localities might inspire forms of cooperation that are more equitable and context-sensitive. It could also help scholars, practitioners and policy makers see how English universities' global strategies impact, and are impacted by, place-bound concerns, from regional development to cultural diversity.

In practice, the call for new theory has been growing. Critics in the global south and decolonial scholars have argued that prevailing narratives of the global university often reflect Western-centric assumptions and overlook alternative imaginaries. There is a need for conceptual tools that capture the messiness of globalisation and place, rather than assuming one-size-fits-all solutions. Massey's framework, developed in other fields of geography and social theory, has not yet been widely applied to the study of higher education. Thus, there is intellectual opportunity in bringing these ideas into dialogue.

1.5 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions

The overall aim of this thesis is to reconceptualise the notion of the global university through a spatial-relational lens, focusing on English higher education as a case context. To this end, the study has the following objectives:

- To critically review how “globalisation” and “global university” are understood in higher education scholarship and policy, including an analysis of concepts such as global imaginary, glocalisation, and neoliberalisation.

- To put in practice Doreen Massey's relational theory of space and place in the context of universities, developing a conceptual framework that foregrounds spatial formation in understanding the global university.
- To gather empirical insights on how English universities enact their global being through their spatial practices.
- To explore how a post-qualitative, new-materialist approach can reveal novel dimensions of the global university that traditional methods might overlook.

This thesis reimagines the global university as an emergent and relational spatial formation constituted through situated practices. It does so by approaching it through making of global imaginaries. Global imaginary—the shared, institutionalised ways in which universities come to imagine, narrate, and orient themselves as “global.” The thesis contends that global imaginaries are materially and spatially produced. They arise between everyday practices, infrastructures, technologies, metrics, policies, and administrative routines that give the global a tangible presence within institutional life. For this reason, the global is approached not as an external scale, but as something made in and through the specificity of university space. This move firstly, situates the making of the global within local, and, secondly, shifts the analytical focus from evaluating whether universities are global, to examining how global is produced, contested, and maintained in their locales. By attending to the everyday, affective, and material dimensions of globalisation, the research challenges dominant status-based narratives and offers a situated, processual understanding of what it means to be, and more importantly to become - a global university.

In response, the doctoral research project poses two central research questions, with

five sub questions to support the empirical investigation by incorporating the global sense of place developed by Massey. The study first asks how global imaginaries are produced locally. It then poses questions to trace how global university space is continuously made, how multiplicity and difference coexist within it, and how global higher education takes shape through situated interactions. These research questions are expected to (1) ground global university in the university locales and (2) highlight and explore the way local and global are mutually constituted through the making of relations – through space.

The following research questions were set out to open and guide the investigation:

RQ1. How are global imaginaries produced in the localities of the universities?

RQ2. What constitutes university space and in particular, global university space?

RQ2a. What is the relation between materiality, global imaginaries, and global practices and events?

RQ2b. What is the relation between the global spaces of the university and other spaces?

RQ2c. What are the distinct trajectories that coexist and create multiplicity?

RQ2d. What are the interrelations of human and non-human interaction?

RQ2e. What are the processes which ensure that space is always being made?

These questions are intentionally broad and exploratory. They are designed to open up the topic rather than test specific hypotheses. The study pursues them through an

iterative process, first, reviewing critical literature, engaging with Massey's ideas, and then conducting a post-qualitative inquiry to see how the concepts resonate with lived realities of English universities.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis (Roadmap)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter critically examines how the idea of the “global university” has been constructed across higher education, sociology, geography, and global studies. It begins by exploring how universities have come to be seen as global actors, often through visible policy frameworks such as internationalisation, global rankings, and economic competitiveness. However, the chapter argues that these dominant framings tend to conflate globalisation with its consequences and treat global as a fixed institutional attribute rather than a relational, spatial process.

In response, the chapter turns to broader theoretical interventions. Drawing on the work of Massey, Appadurai, Steger, and Sassen, it introduces relational understandings of space and the global imaginary. These perspectives highlight that the global is not external to the university but is continuously produced through material and discursive practices within local contexts. Notions of glocalisation, cosmopolitanism, and spatial production are mobilised to challenge static interpretations of the global university.

The review reveals a key gap in the literature - while much research focuses on the outcomes or symptoms of globalisation, there is little attention to how globality is

enacted in and through university spaces. It argues for a shift from status-based framings of global universities to an understanding of globalisation as emergent, multiple, and situated. This gap sets the foundation for the study's conceptual framework, which will approach the global university through making of global imaginaries.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

Chapter 3 brings together key ideas that shape how this study understands and investigates the global university. Rather than offering a fixed theory, the chapter builds a flexible and relational framework using two main concepts: the global imaginary and global sense of place.

The global imaginary (Steger, 2008; Kamola, 2014) refers to shared ways people imagine the world as connected and shaped by global flows, such as international students, technologies, or cultural ideas. It helps this research to examine how global ideas are produced and shared within universities, and how they shape everyday actions, policies, and institutional identity.

To understand how these imaginaries take shape in specific locations, the study draws on Doreen Massey's (2005) global sense of place. Massey sees space not as a fixed background, but as something made through relationships and ongoing interactions. Her work allows us to think about universities as places where the global is not simply added on, but is produced through daily activities, physical spaces, and connections to wider networks.

Together, these two concepts help shift the focus from asking whether a university is global, to asking *how* globality is made, felt, and practiced. The framework supports an investigation into how university spaces, people, objects, and policies all come together to produce what we call “the global university.”

Overall, the goal of the conceptualisation is to develop a particular worldview which maps the study (Curran, 2020). For the purpose of this research, the conceptual framework is developed in order to rethink how we understand the global university. The framework opens up a vision of the global university that is empirically researchable. The selected concepts are chosen for their ability to capture social transformations and move beyond abstract models of globalisation toward the study of concrete, situated relations and processes. It integrates insights from globalisation theory and critical geography to build a coherent lens for analysis.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach developed in direct response to the thesis’s central aim. Emerging from the conceptual framework, this chapter marks a shift from conventional representations of “the global” as a fixed descriptor toward a more relational and processual investigation of its situated emergence within university spaces.

The chapter opens with an articulation of the study’s ontological and epistemological foundations, first reflecting on research questions and underlying assumptions about reality. The adoption of a post-qualitative, new materialist methodology is framed not merely as a technical decision, but as an ethical and ontological commitment. This

orientation enables a methodological operationalisation of Doreen Massey's (2005) concept of a global sense of place, resisting human-centred and representational models in favour of relational and materially entangled accounts of university life. Grounded in the work of scholars such as St. Pierre (2014) and Barad (2007), the chapter elaborates how concepts like intra-action and diffractive analysis are mobilised to trace the co-production of global imaginaries. Research was conducted across three English universities, selected for their distinct geographies and institutional contexts. Participants across different academic and professional positions took part in online interviews. The use of online interviews reflected practical considerations of access, while also acknowledging that digital platforms actively shape research encounters and the knowledge produced through them.

Rather than treating data as extractable content, interviews were read diffractively through one another and through theoretical concepts, allowing emergent patterns and tensions to surface. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical practices and researcher positionality, foregrounding the co-constitutive nature of inquiry. The methodology provides the grounding to reimagine the global university as an unfolding, situated, and spatially enacted formation.

Chapters 5-7: Findings

The findings are presented across three interconnected parts, each offering a distinct yet entangled perspective on how the global university is enacted in everyday university life. This three-part structure reflects the thesis's central ambition to reimagine the global university as a continual unfolding - a doing that emerges

through the spatial, material, and affective practices of institutional life. Moving from broad relational geographies, through the formation of global imaginaries, to the micro-level production of space, the chapter collectively explores how globality is lived and made within three English universities.

Across the chapter, key theoretical concepts - relational space, intra-action, global imaginaries, and spatial production, are mobilised diffractively to illuminate the complexity of the empirical material. Rather than offering isolated findings, the three parts are read as overlapping analytical lenses that refract through one another. Together, they provide a grounded, multi-scalar account of the global university as an emergent, situated formation, one that is continually being made through the interrelations of people, objects, spaces, and imaginaries.

Chapter 5: University and Other Spaces (Relational Geographies)

The first part of findings sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how university spaces function not as isolated or self-contained entities, but as interconnected nodes in a vast web of relationships. It investigates the university as a porous, outward-facing assemblage embedded within wider global flows. Drawing on Doreen Massey's (2005) relational view of space, university is situated as "being-in-the-world," examining the outward connections universities forge, demonstrating how these connections extend far beyond campus boundaries.

This chapter explores the spatial and relational reconfiguration of the university within global and urban contexts. First, it maps the university's embeddedness in global networks and flows to highlight relations to the 'outside'. Subsequently, it attends to

the frictions and asymmetries produced by global market dynamics. Second, it examines the university's engagement with the city and community. This section foregrounds civic responsibilities and the entanglement of university spaces with the everyday life of urban publics. Finally, the chapter considers the co-production of urban assemblages

In line with Massey's (2005) assertion that space is "always under construction" and "always linked to the outside," the university emerges through its ongoing entanglements with places, publics, and processes beyond its immediate locale. Its boundaries are constantly negotiated and reconfigured through relations that stretch beyond the campus, relations with global mobility systems, transnational knowledge circuits, urban infrastructures, and distant others.

Chapter 6: Making of Global Imaginaries (Global in the Local)

The second part of the findings, included in this thesis, explores how global imaginaries are constructed and inhabited within local university contexts. Through Appadurai's (1996) cultural flows and Massey's notion of place as a "constellation of trajectories," the chapter examines how students and staff make sense of global belonging. Here, global imaginaries emerge through everyday intra-actions between people, policies, technologies, and spaces. These imaginaries are shown to be plural and contested, often shaped through improvisation, care, aspiration, and resistance, particularly by marginalised actors. The university, in this view, is a site where globality is not only strategised but imagined, embodied, and reworked.

Chapter 7: Spatial Production in the Global University

The final chapter of the findings focuses on the micro-level production of space within the university. Returning to Massey's (2005) spatial propositions and Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spatial production, it shifts the analytic scale from broader relational entanglements and the production of global imaginaries to the microprocesses through which university space itself is continuously made and remade. Online platforms, flexible workspaces, and environmental conditions (e.g. weather disruptions) are treated as material agents in the making of global academic life.

The chapter invites the reader to consider 'globality' enacted through the textures and rhythms of everyday routines, as opposed to strategic planning or institutional discourse. In particular this section traces the everyday, situated practices through which academic space is relationally constituted. It moves through three thematic strands. The first strand attends to daily academic relations, including teaching, mentoring, collaboration, and the role of non-human actors such as technologies and environments. The second strand examines how academic identities emerge through global pasts, personal trajectories, and institutional roles, foregrounding the temporal and affective dimensions of scholarly subjectivity. The final strand explores the generative potential of curiosity, creativity, and *throwntogetherness*, emphasising responsiveness and care as central to the ongoing negotiation of shared world.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Implications

Chapter 8 brings the diffractive readings together, proposes simple takeaways in terms of theory and policy, and suggests ideas for future research. This concluding chapter

brings the discussion full circle, thus demonstrating how a spatial-relational reimagining of the global university offers new ways to think about higher education in an era of profound global interconnection. It underscores the urgency of these insights for education policy and practice in England and beyond, thereby situating the study's original contributions in the broader field.

Rather than concluding with neat answers, this final chapter opens up new ways of thinking about the global university - as a provocation, a pattern, and a potential. The findings make clear that "global" is not something universities simply achieve; it is continuously being enacted, either in visa applications, hallway conversations, digital platforms, or competing visions of what "global engagement" looks like. This chapter reflects on what becomes visible when we stop searching for the global university as a definable type and start tracing it as a moving formation, one whose shape is always shifting.

The global university, then, is not just an empirical object, but a lens that invites us to notice the relational, the partial, and the emergent. Thinking with concepts like Massey's *throwntogetherness* and Barad's *intra-action*, the chapter proposes that globality is co-produced across multiple scales and agents. They all manifest in tangible struggles over mobility, belonging, and recognition.

Key Takeaways

From the synthesis above, several simple takeaways (in addition to theoretical and philosophical) emerge:

Universities are not global in singular or stable ways. The global emerges through the actions of diverse human actors, staff, students, administrators, each entangled in conflicting imaginaries, goals, and constraints. These multiplicities are not neatly ordered, but shifting, partial, and sometimes chaotic. Recognising this helps institutions support plural understanding of global rather than enforce a single vision.

Non-human actors shape global. Digital infrastructures, buildings, documents, visa systems, and technologies participate in the making of space. The university's global reach is co-produced through these material-semiotic relations, which afford, constrain, and transform who can belong, move, or connect.

Everyday practices produce mattering. By linking the global to the local, the research shows that mundane routines like emails, meetings, classroom encounters shape what and who matters. Universities can actively shape space by noticing these micro-practices and fostering environments that facilitate new connections, collaborations, and forms of recognition.

Rankings obscure the relations they depend on. Global metrics reduce complexity to hierarchy. Rankings are themselves built on relationships, research partnerships, citations, mobility of students and staff. The global university may appear in rankings, but it is made through actual entanglements. Recognising this reframes excellence as relational achievement, not abstract competition.

Relationality is essential to inclusion and equity. Thinking with and through the making of university space reminds us that we are never separate from others. Through

difference, we come to know our connectedness. Recognising the global university as a site of ongoing relational becoming allows us to attend more ethically to who is included, how space is shared, and our location in those relations to make meaningful difference.

An invitation to think with Global University

This final chapter, in a posthuman manner, repositions the global university as a way of thinking, sensing, and intervening in how universities are made, imagined, and inhabited. Drawing on Massey's understanding of space as always under construction and Barad's notion of intra-action, it explores what becomes possible when we treat the global university as an analytic for unsettling taken-for-granted categories and opening up new ways of seeing institutional life.

Opposed to being an endpoint, it is a new opening, an invitation to view global university as a generative horizon, tracing the shifting relations, tensions, and possibilities that shape higher education today. It directs attention to configurations through which universities become global in practice, and through which they are entangled with wider planetary conditions.

For instance, consider the simple act of sitting at a computer, writing an academic text. At first glance, it appears solitary and local. Yet the keyboard is configured to English-language norms, the references cite scholarship across continents, the thoughts are shaped by institutional priorities, global debates, and personal migrations. The screen carries traces of international conferences, peer reviews, digital platforms, and funding calls. This quiet moment of writing is entangled with broader flows of knowledge,

power, infrastructure, and identity. Recognising this entanglement means acknowledging that each person, each practice, and each place is part of a larger constellation of relations. Seeing how these threads interconnect opens up the possibility of reworking them. Actively engaging in this relationality is what gives the university its 'global sense' (Massey, 2005).

2 Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews and synthesises the key literature that inform the study's exploration of the global university within English higher education. It situates the idea of the global university historically and conceptually, examining how it has been produced through policy discourse, academic scholarship, and wider imaginaries of globalisation. The review aims to clarify both how the notion of the global university has arisen and circulated within higher education, and what the category of 'the global' itself signifies within broader social and spatial theory. Together, these aims provide the theoretical and contextual foundations for the conceptual framework that follows in chapter 3.

The first aim is to understand how and where the idea of the global university has emerged.

This involves a critical review of literature on the globalisation of higher education and the dominant imaginings that have shaped its meaning - particularly those of *internationalisation*, *economic competitiveness*, and *global league tables*. These discourses have positioned universities as global actors within a knowledge economy, often measuring globality in terms of mobility, visibility, and performance. Yet, as this chapter shows, such framings tend to conflate globalisation with its effects, treating the global university as a fixed institutional type rather than as a dynamic and uneven process. This part of the review explores how these imaginaries have been constructed,

circulated, and contested, revealing the underlying assumptions that sustain the idea of the global university.

The second aim is to explore what ‘the global’ stands for in social theory and how it can be understood beyond the policy and managerial framings that dominate higher education literature.

To achieve this, the review turns to spatial and relational theories that have conceptualised globalisation as a process of interconnection, differentiation, and production. Drawing on the work of Massey (2005), Appadurai (1996), Steger (2017), and Sassen (2006), it examines how globalisation can be conceptualised as both material and imaginative, as something that is practised, lived, and sensed rather than simply described. These perspectives open up the possibility of understanding the global not as a level or scale “above” the local, but as something continuously enacted through in local social, spatial, and material relations.

In pursuing these two aims, the chapter contributes to the study by highlighting a key gap in existing scholarship: while much research analyses the outcomes or symptoms of globalisation - internationalisation policies, global partnerships, and rankings - there is limited attention to *how global is enacted* through the spatial and affective practices of university life. Recognising this gap reframes the global university as a situated phenomenon, one that must be studied through its relations, spaces rather than its institutional metrics. The below table summarises the overview of the chapter, outlining key focus and purpose of individual sections.

Section	Focus	Purpose / Contribution
The Global and the University: Between Rhetoric and Situated Practice	Examines how the university has been discursively positioned as a global actor through policy, branding, and ideology. Explores the tensions between global rhetoric and the situated realities of institutional practice.	Establishes the central disjuncture between representations of the “global university” and its lived, spatial practices.
Globalisation of Higher Education	Examines how globalisation and internationalisation have been conceptualised in higher education, moving from early integration-focused accounts to more critical perspectives that emphasise inequality and power relations.	Demonstrates how globalisation has been conceptualised as a homogenising process, revealing the limitations of scale-based and economic framings.
Discursive and Institutional Framings of the Global University	Reviews the main strands shaping the idea of the global university: economic and entrepreneurial logics, status-oriented competition, and cultural, cosmopolitan narratives, in which the model of the Global Research University is found.	Shows how these discourses institutionalise the Global Research University as the dominant template for global aspiration, highlighting its historical contingency and the need for alternative imaginaries.
Spatial and Relational Theories in Globalisation	Engages geographical and sociological theories of space, place, and relationality to rethink globalisation as a situated, relational, and material process.	Provides the theoretical reorientation necessary for understanding universities as spatial assemblages through which globalisation is enacted.
Conceptual Gap: Towards Relational Understanding	Synthesises insights from previous sections to identify the conceptual gap in the literature: the absence of relational, spatial, and posthuman analyses of globalisation in higher education.	Positions the study’s <i>conceptual framework</i> - centred on <i>the global imaginary</i> and <i>a global sense of place</i> - as a response to this gap.

Table 1 - Structure and Overview of Literature Review

2.1 The Global and the University: Between Rhetoric and Situated Practice

Ever since the concept of the global began to proliferate across policy, media, and academic discourse in the late twentieth century, it has been invoked as both explanation and solution for an increasingly interconnected world. In higher education, the global university emerged as a response to competitiveness and legitimacy within national systems often framed in the language of mobility, excellence, and innovation. The global thus has become a strategic horizon through which universities could imagine themselves as agents within a wider world society (Marginson, 2016; Meyer, 2007). From its earliest articulations, this idea has carried a powerful narrative as it promises access, exchange, and participation in a shared intellectual and economic order. The notion has acquired near-universal assent even as its meaning remains diffuse. Critics argue that global functions as an empty signifier, encompassing projects that range from international partnerships and global rankings to cosmopolitan citizenship (Robertson, 2010). Beneath this rhetorical consensus lie divergent and sometimes contradictory practices: while some institutions mobilise the global to advance equity and collaboration, others deploy it as a competitive brand or managerial technology that reproduces existing hierarchies (Stein et al., 2019).

As Vaira (2004) notes, higher education institutions play a critical role in reshaping organisational and cultural structures, and the global increasingly informs how relations are imagined, organised, and legitimised within and beyond universities. Yet as globalisation has become a dominant frame for understanding change, analyses often gloss over the micro-processes through which global conditions are enacted in institutional settings. What counts as “being global” is frequently read off from macro-

level changes - academic capitalism, policy convergence, new governance tools, and intensified cross-border competition (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Kauppinen et al., 2017; Maringe, 2010; Maringe & Foskett, 2012). In this landscape, universities are cast as strategic actors in the global knowledge economy, competing for talent, reputation, and resources (Deiaco et al., 2012), and global engagement is framed as a strategic necessity that opens access to markets, networks, and capital (Maringe, 2010). The risk is that the global is equated with a status to be attained or a performance to be managed. For instance, compliance with global scripts becomes a source of organisational legitimacy, signalling conformity to dominant norms (Cliff et al., 2005), and “global university” operates as a rhetorical device rather than a carefully theorised institutional form (Suchman, 1995; Wuthnow et al., 2010).

Over the past three decades, the label has hardened into an institutionalised imaginary embedded in strategy documents, accreditation frameworks, and policy architectures; it now serves as a key model of aspiration even as its values and processes vary widely. For some, it evokes intellectual openness and transnational solidarity; for others, it conceals economic extraction and symbolic power that deepen the neoliberalisation of the sector (Barnett, 2020; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012). Some critiques underline the instability of this status-oriented model. Nelson and Wei (2012) argue that the global university often lacks clear aims, functioning as a nebulous badge of ambition and alignment with international trends, while Collini (2017) notes that as older social contracts recede, no adequate replacement has emerged.

Post-2020, the pandemic, climate crisis, and geopolitical shifts have unsettled assumptions of borderless collaboration and revealed deep interdependencies and

vulnerabilities in global higher education, alongside accelerating digital transformation and the spread of AI in research, teaching, and administration (Ndhlovu, 2021; Peters et al., 2022; Stein, 2021; Zurba et al., 2022). These conditions push toward a more nuanced understanding of what being global entails - one that moves beyond metrics and prestige to reckon with unequal mobility, epistemic exclusion, and the affective labour required to sustain international partnerships.

Critically, scholars warn against conceptualising globalisation as a unidirectional external force acting on passive institutions. Robertson and Dale (2013) argue that this perspective separates universities from the social structures in which they are embedded. Instead, universities are better understood as both sites and agents of globalisation - entangled in flows of knowledge, finance, people, and ideas, and active in shaping those flows through strategy, culture, and spatial configurations (Altbach, 2004; Dale, 2000; Dale & Robertson, 2002). Effects are uneven, because institutions are situated in particular political economies, histories, and cultural geographies, and their modes of engagement vary (Dill, 2009; Marginson, 2011). As Scott (1987) puts it, universities are “objects, victims even, of these processes, but partly as subjects, or key agents, of globalisation” (p. 122). Spatial perspectives help to make this concrete. Scott (2000) urges us to see universities not only as situated actors but as producers of global space. Sassen’s (2004) account of global cities shows how globalisation “gets done” in specific locales where dense institutional networks generate transnational flows; similarly, the global in higher education is materialised through academic spaces, digital infrastructures, governance routines, and pedagogical relations. Appadurai (2001) and Beck (2000) further suggest that globalisation is performed through local

responses, aspirations, and anxieties and thus is as much lived as structural. In particular, Appadurai's (2001) call for attention to "globalisation from below" directs analysis to the daily practices through which universities enact their globalness, which could be hiring and promotion, partnership-building, curriculum design, student support, and to the frictions that arise when international ambitions meet national regulation, local commitments, or infrastructural limits. This perspective invites a shift from static notions of global status toward relationality, situated practice, and spatial imagination. Universities are not just passenger of global tide; they can be imagined as key navigators, setting priorities, and shaping the routes they travel. In doing so, they can redirect globalisation toward outcomes that are more equitable, contextually responsive, and socially productive (Steger, 2008; Connell, 2018). Barnett's (1997) notion of the university as a site of "critical being" aligns with this view, positioning the institution as a space where new forms of thought, practice, and relation can be generated. Rather than merely adapting to pressure, universities can cultivate alternative global engagement grounded in ethics, reciprocity, and co-production (Stein, 2020; Tikly, 2019).

2.3 Globalisation of Higher Education

The field of globalisation and higher education has grown into a distinctive scholarly domain that examines the conditions, processes, and implications of how global transformations shape - and are shaped by - universities. While it shares roots with globalisation theory and internationalisation studies, it occupies a unique position, combining conceptual, policy, and empirical investigations into how higher education systems, institutions, and practices are entangled in global flows of knowledge, capital,

people, and power. It also critically interrogates how this entanglement is experienced, resisted, and reimagined across diverse geographies.

In its initial formulation, globalisation in higher education was often associated with a narrative of progress and convergence. Institutions across the globe appeared to be aligning with international norms of quality assurance, competitive funding, and performance metrics. This vision was supported by organisations like the World Bank, UNESCO, and the OECD, which positioned higher education as central to national development and competitiveness in the global knowledge economy (Lebeau & Sall, 2011). UNESCO's emphasis on access and social development stood in contrast to the World Bank's more instrumentalist approach linking higher education to labour market efficiencies. These global policy frameworks played a pivotal role in shaping national HE reforms, particularly in the Global South, where aid and policy transfer mechanisms reinforced standardised

As King, Marginson, and Naidoo (2011) outline in the Handbook on Globalization and Higher Education, early research in the field focused on mapping global patterns: increasing student mobility, the spread of English as a medium of instruction, international branch campuses, and the rise of global university rankings. These shifts were widely seen as signs that higher education was becoming an integrated global sector. Yet over time, this narrative has been challenged by scholars who stress that globalisation is not a uniform force but a contested process, deeply uneven in its effects and differentiated by region, institution type, and epistemic orientation. models often decoupled from local needs (Mundy & Madden, 2010).

Early work in this field was primarily descriptive, seeking to map the expanding reach of higher education across national borders. Research focused on measurable trends such as international student mobility (Altbach & Knight, 2007), the spread of English as the dominant medium of instruction, the proliferation of transnational and branch campuses, and the global circulation of academic labour. The rise of global university rankings and performance metrics in the early 2000s further reinforced the perception that higher education was becoming an integrated global sector governed by shared norms of competition and excellence (Hazelkorn, 2015). The idea of the global university emerged as both symbol and instrument of this transformation: a model of institutional success defined by visibility, mobility, and international prestige.

Over time, scholars began to question both the coherence of globalisation and its presumed benefits. The term itself, as Perraton (2019) notes, has been used to describe everything from economic liberalisation to cultural homogenisation, making it both conceptually slippery and politically charged. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) proposed the influential “glonacal” heuristic - global, national, and local - as co-constitutive scales of HE activity. This framework enabled a more situated analysis of how globalisation was unevenly enacted, with institutions often navigating contradictory pressures from local constraints and global aspirations. Over time, scholars such as Marginson (2010, 2018), Rizvi and Lingard (2009) and Mok (2007) have argued that globalisation is not a homogeneous force but a contested and uneven process, producing differentiated outcomes across regions, institutional types, and epistemic traditions. The assumption that globalisation simply “happens” to higher education has been replaced by analyses of how universities actively make the global through

policies, partnerships, and discourses that reflect particular cultural and political histories. This shift marked an important move from globalisation as structure to globalisation as practice.

This multi-scalar complexity has only intensified since the mid-2010s, as scholars have drawn on a broader conceptual repertoire to account for how globalisation in higher education is lived and governed across overlapping spatial registers. Attention to multi-sited and multi-scalar governance highlights how universities simultaneously negotiate local institutional practices, national policy regimes, regional alignments, and global infrastructures such as rankings, mobility systems, and knowledge markets. At the same time, foreign concepts like Chinese “tianxia” (literally translated as “all under heaven”) has been mobilised as an alternative imaginary of a borderless academic sphere, challenging state-centric and competitive models of global engagement by foregrounding relationality, ethical obligation, and shared responsibility for knowledge production beyond territorial boundaries (Yang et al., 2024). Together with renewed framings of higher education as a global public good, these approaches reorient analysis from linear models of global convergence toward more situated, relational, and normatively expansive understandings of how universities participate in and reshape globalisation (Marginson et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, Schot and Steinmueller (2018) argue that the knowledge economy has evolved into multiple “transformations,” including platform capitalism and the digitalisation of academic labour. These dynamics have exacerbated inequalities among institutions - between elite “world-class” universities and underfunded regional

ones - as well as within them, as academic precarity increases in the name of global competitiveness (Hodgson, 2019).

From Mobility and Markets to Geopolitics and Resistance

While early literature emphasised mobility and market expansion, recent studies have shifted focus to the frictions, exclusions, and limits of globalisation in higher education. Lee (2021) reflects on the evolution of the field, noting that globalisation was initially framed through optimistic visions of boundary-crossing mobility, only later to be reinterpreted through the lens of disruption, inequality, and institutional fragility. The COVID-19 pandemic served as an inflection point, interrupting international mobility and exposing the dependency of many institutions on tuition from international students, particularly in Anglophone countries.

More broadly, geopolitical shifts have problematised assumptions about the open, liberal global order that underpinned earlier globalisation narratives. Cantwell, Marginson, and Smolentseva (2023) argue that we now face new geopolitics of higher education, where universities are no longer just knowledge hubs but sites of geopolitical contestation, national security concerns, and soft power strategies. The rise of China and the expansion of South-South collaborations, such as the Belt and Road Initiative's education strand, challenge Western-centric imaginaries of global academic excellence and cooperation. These developments disrupt simplistic North-to-South flows of knowledge and students, underscoring the need to reconceptualise globalisation in HE as plural, multi-directional, and politically mediated.

Alongside this, critiques from postcolonial and decolonial scholarship have deepened. Scholars such as Stein and Andreotti (2021) argue that the globalisation of higher education often replicates colonial logics, enforcing Eurocentric epistemologies and undermining local knowledge systems. This critique speaks directly to epistemic injustice by foregrounding how authority over what counts as legitimate knowledge is established and the conditions under which it is recognised. Research has continuously exposed how the global university is entangled with Eurocentric epistemologies and colonial hierarchies of knowledge production. For instance, reframing globalisation as an ongoing project of epistemic domination and calls for pluriversal or planetary alternatives (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Ndhlovu (2021) and Tikly (2019) call for “epistemic decolonisation” as a necessary counterweight to the dominant neoliberal rationalities in HE, advocating for pluriversal approaches that centre diverse ways of knowing, being, and relating.

Post-global and planetary perspectives (Connell, 2019; Jazeel, 2019; Mbembe, 2021) have shifted attention from global integration to the environmental, material, and relational conditions that sustain planetary life. Here, the university is reconsidered as a planetary institution embedded in ecological, social, and ethical interdependencies. At the same time, the local and regional reorientations of research - through ideas such as contextual internationalisation (Jones, 2019) and regional knowledge ecologies (Tikly, 2024)- have emphasised how universities are rooted in specific places and histories, generating diverse forms of academic globality that resist homogenisation.

These critical perspectives have gained momentum in the post-2020 landscape. The Black Lives Matter movement, pandemic-related inequalities, and climate emergencies have led universities as well as scholars to rethink global engagement not just as an economic strategy but as an ethical and ecological imperative. As such, the globalisation of higher education is increasingly studied not only through the lens of policy diffusion or economic integration, but also through themes such as social justice, planetary wellbeing, and epistemic pluralism.

Digitalisation and the Reconfiguration of Global Space

A key component expediting the globalisation of higher education has been the expansion of digitalisation, understood as the embedding of digital infrastructures, platforms, and data-driven systems into academic work, governance, and cross-border engagement (Alnagrat et al., 2022). Scholarship predating COVID-19 identified digital technologies as enabling new forms of transnational collaboration, mobility at a distance, and the re-scaling of academic space beyond territorial boundaries (Khalid et al., 2018; Tømte et al., 2019). These dynamics intensified markedly during the pandemic, when digital infrastructures shifted from supplementary tools to core institutional systems. As Díaz-García et al. (2022) demonstrate, scholarly output on digital transformation in higher education surged during and after this period, reflecting how digital platforms became central to global engagement, pedagogic practice, and institutional governance.

Yet digitalisation is not a neutral or evenly distributed process. As Thompson (2020) notes, the global digital turn has exposed new forms of inequality, particularly in

access to infrastructure, digital literacy, and language hegemony online. While elite institutions quickly adopted hybrid and online learning, many universities, especially in the Global South, faced infrastructural limitations that deepened existing inequities. Furthermore, platformisation introduces new dependencies, as universities rely on third-party tech providers for educational delivery, data analytics, and surveillance, raising critical questions about autonomy and governance.

Scholars are increasingly attuned to how digital technologies reshape global academic space, not just through access, but through logistical rationalities - timing, responsiveness, standardisation - that further entrench the logic of speed and flexibility already central to academic capitalism (Peters, 2011). In this sense, globalisation in higher education is no longer just about mobility across space, but about the compression and control of time, data, and interaction across institutional and bodily scales.

Emerging Futures: Multipolarity, Reflexivity, and Situated Globalities

Amid these complex dynamics, a more reflexive and critical strand of scholarship is emerging - one that resists grand narratives and instead seeks to understand how globalisation is lived, interpreted, and contested in different educational contexts. As Appadurai (2001) urges, to study globalisation in education requires a “serious commitment to the globalisation from below... its institutions, its vocabularies, its horizons” (p. 7). Such work highlights how globalisation is not simply imposed from above or outside, but is co-produced in the everyday work of academics, students, administrators, and policy actors.

This orientation aligns with what Marginson (2022a) calls the shift from globalisation to multipolarity, a decentring of Western dominance and the rise of regional powers, alternative epistemologies, and differentiated models of global engagement. Scholars now attend more carefully to how universities negotiate their global position in relation to national priorities, institutional histories, and local communities. As Stein (2020) notes, the challenge is to reimagine the global university not as an endpoint of competitive ascent, but as a site for ethical relationality and world-making under conditions of planetary crisis.

This broader conceptualisation helps explain the diversity of globalisation experiences across institutions and regions. For some, globalisation still offers opportunities for growth and connection. For others, it reinforces dependency, epistemic extractivism, and bureaucratic overload. The literature increasingly acknowledges that these experiences are not merely different in scale but in kind, thus demanding more situated and critical methodologies to grasp the complex interplay of global forces and local practices.

[Internationalisation: A Distinct but Interwoven Process](#)

An important strand within the wider literature on globalisation and higher education is internationalisation - a process often conflated with globalisation yet conceptually distinct from it (Maringe & Foskett, 2012). Whereas globalisation denotes the broad structural transformations linking economies, cultures, and knowledge systems across borders, internationalisation refers to institutional and policy responses to those transformations. It is, as Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) suggest, a

mediating process through which universities interpret, operationalise, and perform the pressures and possibilities of an increasingly interconnected world.

Internationalisation encompasses a wide range of initiatives - curricular reform, academic mobility, cross-border education, and research collaboration - through which universities seek to foster intercultural exchange and global engagement (Knight, 2013; Teichler, 1999, 2004). As Buckner (2020) observes, these activities have not simply expanded the university's reach but reshaped its internal mission and governance: to 'embrace the global', universities have rewritten institutional strategies, altered funding priorities, and redefined academic practice. Stensaker et al. (2019), analysing institutional plans across 33 countries, found that internationalisation is now embedded as a structural principle in higher education systems worldwide. It has thus become one of the most visible and enduring legacies of globalisation's influence on higher education policy.

The Rise of Internationalisation in Research and Policy

Although practices of cross-border scholarship and mobility have long existed, internationalisation entered the lexicon of higher education in the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War and the consolidation of neoliberal globalisation. Early research positioned internationalisation as a means of extending the humanistic and cooperative ideals associated with post-war reconstruction - mutual understanding, peace, and global citizenship (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bamberger et al., 2019). Yet it was also increasingly understood as a pragmatic response to global integration, linking

higher education to trade liberalisation, technological change, and the knowledge economy. During this formative period, scholars such as de Wit (2014), Knight (2004) and Scott (1998) codified key definitions and typologies that continue to underpin the field. Knight's (2004) influential framework categorised rationales for internationalisation as academic, political, economic, and socio-cultural, while highlighting its diverse manifestations across institutions and systems. The 1990s–2000s saw internationalisation institutionalised as a policy domain and professional field. Major higher education associations in Europe, North America, and Australasia – such as the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the European Association for International Education (EAIE) – advanced internationalisation as both normative and necessary, associating it with intercultural competence, employability, and global engagement (Deuel, 2022). The emergence of “comprehensive internationalisation” (Hudzik, 2011) marked a further consolidation of this agenda: the call to embed international and intercultural perspectives “across all dimensions” of the university. Research during this period largely reflected the concerns of practitioner-scholars in Anglophone contexts, focusing on institutional strategy, student mobility, and the design of international curricula (Streitwieser & Ogden, 2016). As Bedenlier et al. (2018) note, this Western European and North American dominance also shaped the field's epistemic orientation, privileging experiences and policy models from these regions.

Internationalisation as a Policy Movement

At the policy level, internationalisation developed alongside national and regional initiatives aimed at fostering cross-border cooperation, talent attraction, and higher

education reform. European integration - through the Bologna Process, Erasmus Programme, and Horizon 2020 - served as a model for aligning mobility, quality assurance, and research collaboration (de Wit et al., 2017). Comparable frameworks emerged in East Asia and the Middle East, with regional governments using internationalisation to strengthen higher education capacity, innovation, and geopolitical influence (Mok, 2007; Rizvi, 2011). These developments reflected both shared aspirations and differentiated strategies, illustrating how internationalisation became a site of policy experimentation linking universities, states, and supranational bodies.

By the 2010s, the field had matured into a distinct area of higher education research, characterised by specialised journals, handbooks, and typologies (Knight, 2014; de Wit & Hunter, 2015). However, this consolidation also produced tensions. As studies mapped rationales and models, critics noted that the literature tended toward normative advocacy - prescriptive guidance on “best practice” - rather than critical analysis (Kehm, 2011). The field’s proximity to policy-making and professional practice risked depoliticising its object of study. Nonetheless, this professionalisation ensured that internationalisation became a durable conceptual and administrative framework through which universities positioned themselves within global higher education.

The Critical Turn

In the past decade, internationalisation scholarship has undergone what Mulvey (2022) calls a “critical turn”, marked by deeper engagement with questions of power,

inequality, and epistemic hierarchy. Mwangi et al. (2018) and Mittelmeier and Yang (2022) note that this critical orientation has emerged from dissatisfaction with internationalisation's predominantly instrumental focus. Within this shift, two broad strands can be identified.

The mainstream critical strand calls for rebalancing internationalisation toward inclusion, access, and the public good. This includes initiatives such as internationalisation at home (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), curriculum reform, and internationalisation for society (Jones et al., 2021; Leask & de Gayardon, 2021), which align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Ramaswamy et al., 2021). While these efforts broaden participation and ethical engagement, they often retain the structural assumptions of earlier approaches, viewing internationalisation as a reformable policy domain rather than a site of contestation.

The radical strand, grounded in postcolonial and decolonial theory, interrogates internationalisation as part of a modern/colonial global imaginary (Stein & Andreotti, 2017; Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). Scholars argue that contemporary internationalisation reproduces Eurocentric epistemologies, linguistic hierarchies, and racialised power relations (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Blanco Ramirez, 2014; Leal et al., 2022). From this perspective, internationalisation is not merely the diffusion of Western models but a continuation of historical patterns of colonial dominance—manifest in the privileging of English, Western curricula, and Northern partnerships. Postcolonial critiques have been particularly valuable in exposing the unevenness of global knowledge flows and the marginalisation of local epistemologies (Johnstone & Lee, 2022; Guo et al., 2022).

However, as Mulvey (2022) and Glass and Cruz (2022) observe, this radical literature can sometimes universalise Western hegemony and overlook the multipolar and shifting geopolitics of contemporary higher education, including emergent forms of “de-Westernisation” (Mignolo, 2011). The result is a field now animated by tension: between reformist efforts to rehumanise internationalisation and radical efforts to deconstruct it altogether.

Implications for Understanding the Global University

Tracing the development of internationalisation reveals it as a distinct but interwoven process - a field of research, policy, and practice that has shaped the assumptions of global university without being synonymous with it. Internationalisation provided the institutional vocabulary through which universities first articulated their aspirations: mobility, collaboration, interculturality, and mutual exchange. Yet its trajectory also demonstrates how the global university has been imagined through particular policy logics, epistemic geographies, and institutional histories.

Understanding this genealogy is crucial for the argument developed in this thesis: that the global university cannot be reduced to the outcomes or strategies of internationalisation. Rather, internationalisation represents one historical and conceptual pathway through which globalisation is materialised in higher education. It thus serves as a bridge between the structural dynamics of globalisation and the situated, relational practices explored later in this study.

2.4 Discursive and Institutional Framings of the Global University

The field of global higher education is shaped by a diverse array of imaginaries, frameworks through which the idea of the "global university" is constructed, circulated, and made actionable. These imaginaries influence how institutions define themselves, set strategic priorities, and orient to wider geopolitical, cultural, and epistemic flows. While globalisation brings complex and uneven changes to higher education, it is the dominant imaginaries that translate these shifts into specific institutional logics and policy scripts (Marginson, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In considering the university as a global institution Snott (2011) identifies two major consequences of globalisation for universities, firstly, the emergence of the knowledge economy, and, secondly, the rise of world culture and cultural differentiation. These continue to frame the dominant interpretive strands in global higher education studies. The first views universities as strategic actors in global markets, competing for reputation, funding, and human capital. The second emphasises social and cultural engagements like the reconfiguration of identity, mobility, belonging, and global citizenship. These broad currents reflect Marginson's (2011) theorisation of three imaginings shaping HE, namely, the global market economy, global status competition, and open-source knowledge flows.

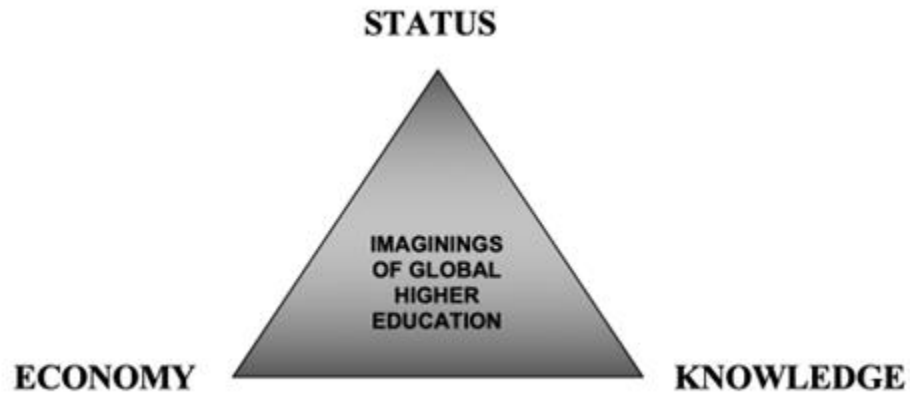


Figure 1 - "Imaginings of global HE"(Marginson, 2011)

The following sections unpack these dominant ways in which the global university is commonly imagined, through economic value, status and ranking, and cultural reach. These imaginings matter because they provide the frames through which globality is assumed, interpreted, and made sense of in everyday institutional life. Rather than merely describing the global university, they actively shape how universities organise themselves, justify strategic choices, and enact global engagement in practice.

The Economic Imagining and the Entrepreneurial University

One of the most pervasive imaginaries in global higher education is that of the university as a market actor within a global knowledge economy. This imaginary has intensified over recent decades as universities have been reconfigured along neoliberal logics of competitiveness, efficiency, and commodification (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Within this view, globalisation is often conflated with the spread of market-oriented reforms, including the introduction of tuition fees, institutional branding, and performative metrics tied to economic

outcomes (Cantwell, Coates, & King, 2018; Ball & Youdell, 2009). These shifts have transformed how universities are organised, valued, and imagined: from autonomous public institutions serving the collective good to entrepreneurial entities competing for students, research income, and international prestige.

The institutionalisation of this economic imaginary has been reinforced by the growing influence of international organisations such as the World Bank, OECD, and WTO (Peet, 2009), whose policy frameworks have cast higher education as both a tradable global service and a mechanism for human capital development. This global policy discourse has facilitated the rise of for-profit providers, public-private partnerships, and performance-based funding models (Ball, 2012), entrenching an understanding of education as an economic rather than civic or epistemic endeavour. In this model, universities are seen as key drivers of national and regional competitiveness, central to the “knowledge economy” and to global economic growth.

However, scholars such as Rizvi and Lingard (2010) caution against equating globalisation entirely with neoliberalism. While neoliberal reforms have undeniably shaped the sector, globalisation also operates through cultural, spatial, and institutional contingencies that produce hybrid and uneven outcomes. Appadurai’s (1996) notion of scapes and Sassen’s (2004) concept of assemblages illustrate how global flows are differentiated and multi-layered, while Beck’s (2009) work on cosmopolitanism underscores the cultural and political diversity within globalisation processes. Similarly, Massey’s (2005) relational spatiality draws attention to how universities exist within entangled local and global relations, acting not merely as

passive recipients of global pressures but as active sites where globalisation is reproduced and reinterpreted.

This layered perspective suggests that universities are both embedded in and productive of economic globalisation. Their spaces - physical, digital, and symbolic - are simultaneously localised and globally mediated. Rather than being reducible to neoliberal sites, universities must be understood as hybrid organisations navigating multiple and sometimes conflicting logics: academic, civic, economic, and ethical. This complexity becomes visible in the growing prominence of the entrepreneurial university, an institutional archetype that exemplifies the economic imaginary in action.

The Entrepreneurial University as Institutional Form

The idea of the entrepreneurial university crystallised in the late twentieth century as universities sought to respond to policy demands for innovation, industry collaboration, and financial self-sufficiency. Within this model, universities are imagined as economic enterprises—adaptive, competitive, and market-oriented (Clark, 1998; Etzkowitz, 2008). Entrepreneurialism extends beyond income generation or spinouts; it becomes a governing rationality that reshapes organisational structures, academic labour, and institutional identity (Shattock, 2009; Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014).

In a global context, the entrepreneurial university embodies a universalising ideal: a self-sustaining institution operating within global knowledge markets, continuously seeking to convert research into innovation and reputation into revenue. However, as

Lawton Smith and Bagchi-Sen (2010) note, there is no singular pathway to becoming entrepreneurial. Rather than institutional convergence, what emerges is a spectrum of contextually differentiated forms of entrepreneurialism that reflect the uneven geographies of the higher education sector.

In England, research-intensive universities often pursue entrepreneurialism through research commercialisation, knowledge transfer, and participation in global innovation ecosystems linked to venture capital and industry partnerships. Intellectual property generation and translational research are embedded within institutional strategies, reinforcing these universities' positioning within global hierarchies of research and prestige. Alongside this model, however, a substantial profit-oriented international education market has emerged, in which entrepreneurial activity is organised around fee-based cross-border provision, transnational education partnerships, pathway programmes, and international student recruitment. Many post-1992 universities, as well as private and alternative providers, engage entrepreneurialism through this commercial terrain, combining regional engagement, consultancy, and enterprise education with revenue generation from international markets. In these cases, entrepreneurial practice is oriented less toward research capitalisation and more toward teaching-led global mobility, employability agendas, and market responsiveness, intersecting with what Goddard and Vallance (2013) describe as the civic entrepreneurial university, but extending it into explicitly commercialised forms of global engagement.

This differentiation suggests that the economic imaginary operates less as a single, coherent script than as a patterned set of practices shaped by uneven access to

resources, networks, and opportunities, which can be explained by asymmetric global interdependencies. In this sense, universities participate in entrepreneurial activity from different positions within shared economic structures, rather than through neatly separated or status-bound roles. Research collaboration, international recruitment, regional partnerships, and knowledge exchange are pursued across the sector, albeit with varying emphases and capacities. What unites these practices is that the economic imaginary tends to frame the university's relationship to the global primarily through market participation and competitiveness, often narrowing the space for epistemic, social, or civic orientations to global engagement.

Consequences of the Economic Imaginary

The dominance of this economic framing has significant consequences for the identity and function of the university. Scholars have documented the rise of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), where research agendas, curricula, and institutional priorities are increasingly aligned with market imperatives. Knowledge is reframed as intellectual property; students are positioned as consumers; and success is measured through quantifiable outputs such as rankings, patents, and graduate salaries. The managerial cultures that accompany these reforms have introduced performative metrics - such as the REF, TEF, and KEF in the UK - that entrench competition and audit as defining features of academic life (Ball, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2015).

At the same time, the economic imaginary intensifies inequality within and between institutions. The logic of competition rewards those already advantaged by reputation and resources, deepening the divide between research-intensive and teaching-focused

universities. It also narrows the scope of the university's public mission, subordinating civic responsibility and critical inquiry to economic utility (Nixon, 2011; Marginson, 2018). Moreover, the entrepreneurial turn reshapes academic subjectivities: scholars and students are increasingly expected to perform as self-managing, enterprising subjects, internalising the logics of productivity and innovation (Gill, 2009).

Recent debates signal a growing unease with the dominance of the economic imaginary. Critical scholarship has turned towards alternative conceptualisations of value in higher education, including the public good university (Marginson, 2016), caring and sustainable universities (Barnett, 2022), and post-capitalist imaginaries that emphasise knowledge commons and social justice (Hall, 2020). These emerging perspectives do not reject economic activity outright but challenge its hegemony by foregrounding other relational, ethical, and ecological dimensions of the university's global condition.

In sum, the economic imagining constructs the university as a market-oriented enterprise embedded in the global knowledge economy. Through the entrepreneurial university model, this imaginary has redefined how institutions conceive of their purpose, their spatial relations, and their participation in globalisation. Yet this process is uneven and contested as universities enact entrepreneurialism in multiple ways that reflect their histories, geographies, and power positions. The consequences are both structural and epistemic - reshaping what counts as valuable knowledge and who benefits from its production. Recognising these dynamics is crucial for understanding how the global university has been imagined and materialised, and for opening

conceptual space for alternative, more relational understandings of globalisation developed later in this chapter.

League Tables and Global Competition

Closely aligned with the economic imaginary of higher education is a parallel status-based imagining, which frames universities as participants in a global hierarchy of prestige. The emergence of global university rankings has been central to the consolidation of this imaginary. Systems such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education (THE), and QS World University Rankings have, since the early 2000s, transformed how institutions are positioned, compared, and evaluated internationally (Hazelkorn, 2011, 2015; Marginson, 2018). These rankings translate complex institutional realities into a limited set of quantifiable indicators like citations, reputation surveys, and international staff or student ratios, making the university legible to a worldwide audience. In doing so, they have reshaped the landscape of higher education by providing a new infrastructure of comparison through which universities understand themselves and others.

Initially introduced as informational tools to assist prospective students and policymakers, league tables have since become powerful governing devices. Their methodology, though seemingly technical, embeds particular assumptions about what constitutes quality and success in higher education. Metrics tend to privilege research output and citation impact, often in English-language journals, as proxies for excellence (Altbach, 2016; Krücken & Meier, 2006). Over time, this narrow focus has

contributed to the consolidation of a global model of academic value centred on research intensity, international visibility, and measurable performance.

The rise of global rankings must also be understood in relation to wider policy and economic transformations. The 1990s and early 2000s saw governments, international organisations, and funding agencies adopt performance metrics as part of broader moves toward accountability and market-based governance. In this context, university rankings aligned neatly with emerging audit cultures and managerial rationalities (Shore & Wright, 2015). They provided a seemingly objective, external measure of performance that appealed to governments seeking to demonstrate value and to institutions aspiring to global recognition. As Hazelkorn (2015) notes, rankings have become “a new currency of reputation” in higher education, shaping everything from strategic planning to recruitment, partnerships, and resource allocation.

One of the most significant effects of this development has been the expansion of competition within and across national systems. The capacity to rank universities on a global scale introduced a new visibility to higher education: institutions could now be compared, ordered, and benchmarked far beyond their local or national contexts. Marginson and van der Wende (2007) describe this as the emergence of a vertical global system, in which universities are stratified by measurable indicators of prestige. Rankings have thus become not only reflections of reputational hierarchies but also mechanisms through which those hierarchies are reproduced and intensified (Benneworth, Westerheijden, & Cremonini, 2010). Their influence extends beyond perception, shaping institutional behaviour and even national policy.

The notion of global competition in higher education builds on this new infrastructure of visibility. Scholars point out that competition arises from both internal and external dynamics (Naidoo, 2018; Musselin, 2018). Internally, institutions compete for students, academic talent, and research income; externally, they are influenced by funding regimes, policy pressures, and ranking organisations. For many universities, competitiveness has become a measure of institutional vitality: the ability to secure resources, attract recognition, and maintain a favourable position within global circuits of evaluation (Secundo et al., 2017). The global rankings, in this sense, have not merely reflected competition—they have made it calculable and therefore actionable.

The growing significance of rankings has also prompted policy responses at national and regional levels. Governments around the world have launched targeted initiatives — for example, China’s Double First-Class initiative, Russia’s 5–100 Programme, Germany’s Excellence Initiative, and France’s Initiatives d’Excellence (IdEx) — in order to enhance the international visibility and performance of higher education institutions. These “world-class university” programmes reinforce the idea that success in higher education is measurable and comparable at a global scale, while also concentrating investment into a limited number of elite institutions. More recently, Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and related higher education strategy have explicitly set out the ambition for at least five Saudi universities to rank among the top 200 globally by 2030. In doing so, the Saudi government uses global rankings not simply as a benchmark but as a medium through which national educational and economic ambitions are expressed and operationalised. As Cantwell, Marginson, and Smolentseva (2023) note, rankings are increasingly entangled with geopolitical

competition, as states harness higher education visibility for national soft power and global influence.

While rankings have generated intense critique (Brown, 2006; Dill & Soo, 2005; Saisana et al., 2011), they remain deeply embedded in institutional and governmental practice. Their appeal lies in the promise of simplicity and objectivity in an otherwise complex and diverse sector. Yet, this very simplification raises critical questions about what is lost in translation: the richness of local missions, disciplinary diversity, and social and educational purposes that resist quantification. Scholars have also warned that the logic of competition can create cumulative advantage, amplifying inequality between well-resourced and under-resourced institutions and narrowing the definition of academic success (Hazelkorn, 2015; Lynch, 2014).

Despite these concerns, competition has not been wholly negative. Some analyses suggest that the visibility and benchmarking afforded by rankings have encouraged universities to enhance transparency, strengthen strategic planning, and foster international collaboration (De Haan, 2015; Erhardt & von Kotzebue, 2016). Yet, even these outcomes are often conditioned by audit-driven imperatives rather than educational values. The broader consequence is a sector increasingly organised around a logic of comparison, where universities are compelled to align their goals with global metrics in order to remain visible and legitimate.

Universities and the Cultural Dimension of Globalisation

Alongside the economic and status imaginaries that dominate global higher education, a parallel set of ideas has emerged which frame universities as cultural and ethical actors within an interconnected world. This global culture and citizenship imaginary envisions higher education not as a competitive marketplace but as a site of intercultural dialogue, civic engagement, and knowledge exchange across borders (Delanty, 2006; Marginson, 2010; Scott, 2011). It shifts attention from what universities possess—rankings, capital, or research power—to what they do in fostering global understanding and shared human development.

In contrast to instrumental accounts of globalisation as market expansion, this literature situates universities within broader flows of knowledge, culture, and ideas. Marginson (2010) identifies this as the third imagining of global higher education—one that views globalisation as a process of cultural encounter and intellectual interdependence, rather than simply economic integration. From this perspective, universities operate as mediators of global knowledge flows: producing, circulating, and translating ideas across linguistic, disciplinary, and national boundaries.

Marginson and colleagues (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Marginson, 2007, 2010) argue that such flows are uneven but relational - constituting a world system of higher education marked by interdependence, dialogue, and asymmetry. Rather than passive recipients of global trends, universities actively construct transnational epistemic communities and public spheres. Scott (2011) similarly emphasises that globalisation invites a renewed social and cultural mission for universities: to act as mediating

institutions that connect the local and the global, fostering cosmopolitan sensibilities, intercultural learning, and civic responsibility.

These accounts reframe the global university as a communicative institution—a space through which meanings, values, and identities are negotiated. The globalisation of higher education thus entails not only the movement of students and staff but also the circulation of epistemologies, pedagogies, and cultural norms. It creates what Marginson (2010) calls a global public good: the shared intellectual resources that transcend market value and support collective human advancement

Cosmopolitan Education and Global Citizenship

Building on these ideas, scholars have increasingly turned to the notion of cosmopolitanism to articulate how universities might engage ethically with global interdependence. Cosmopolitanism here refers not merely to international awareness but to an educational ethos that cultivates reflexivity, empathy, and critical engagement with difference (Nussbaum, 1997; Appiah, 2006). Delanty (2006) proposes the cosmopolitan university as an institution capable of fostering global solidarity through critical dialogue—an intellectual space where global interconnection becomes an opportunity for mutual learning rather than dominance.

In this light, global citizenship education becomes central to the moral and cultural project of higher education. It promotes a form of belonging that transcends national borders while remaining attentive to diversity and inequality (Lehtomäki, Moate, & Posti-Ahokas, 2016; Jones & Killick, 2013). Within this literature, universities are seen as

training grounds for cosmopolitan subjects where individuals are capable to navigate global challenges, from climate change to migration, with a sense of ethical responsibility and civic imagination.

Yet, as Rizvi (2009) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010) caution, cosmopolitanism cannot be understood outside of power and history. They argue that liberal models of global citizenship risk reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to transcend, universalising Western norms under the guise of inclusivity. Their critique reframes cosmopolitan education as postcolonial practice, one that must acknowledge uneven access to mobility, recognition, and voice in the global knowledge economy. This shift from idealised cosmopolitanism to critical global citizenship marks an important conceptual turn in recent scholarship (Andreotti, 2011; Tikly, 2019).

Recent research elaborates how universities enact these ideals in practice. Leask (2015) and Killick (2018) show how internationalised curricula can facilitate intercultural learning and the formation of cosmopolitan competences, though often unevenly and within the constraints of neoliberal governance. Others, such as Stein (2017) and Andreotti et al. (2018), argue for ethical internationalisation—a reorientation of global education toward reciprocity, humility, and shared responsibility rather than competition.

These developments reflect an attempt to reclaim the university's public and moral purpose in an era of globalisation. Scott (2011) contends that universities must reassert their role as “cultural mediators” and “ethical communities” capable of engaging global diversity while upholding academic freedom and critical inquiry. This perspective challenges the dominance of performative metrics by proposing that the global

university's legitimacy derives not from visibility or wealth, but from its contribution to dialogue, democracy, and cultural coexistence.

Critiques and Emerging Directions

Nonetheless, the cosmopolitan imaginary is not free from tension. Critics point out that appeals to global citizenship often mask structural inequalities in access to mobility, linguistic capital, and cultural legitimacy (Rhoads & Szelényi, 2011; Madge, Raghuram & Noxolo, 2015). The “global citizen” can become an exclusionary figure—embodying privilege rather than pluralism. In response, scholars such as Stein and Andreotti (2021) and Ndhlovu (2021) advocate for decolonial and pluriversal models of global engagement, in which universities move beyond exporting universalist norms toward cultivating multiple epistemic centres and knowledge traditions.

This reorientation does not abandon cosmopolitan ideals but radicalises them: proposing a relational global citizenship grounded in dialogue, accountability, and shared vulnerability. Universities, in this sense, alongside producing globally mobile professionals should become ‘laboratories’ for learning how to live together amid difference. They function as cultural crossroads giving institutions opportunity to reflect, and potentially reshape, the moral and intellectual geographies of globalisation.

The global culture and citizenship imaginary positions the university as a moral and communicative institution that contributes to the making of a shared global consciousness. It builds on Marginson's (2010) notion of global knowledge flows and

Scott's (2011) vision of the culturally engaged university, advancing an understanding of higher education as a generator of global public goods and civic capacities. Through the lenses of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship, this strand of scholarship offers a corrective to the dominance of market-based imaginaries, imagining a global university committed not only to excellence but also to equity, dialogue, and ethical interconnection.

2.5 The Global Research University (GRU) or Global University Model

At the intersection of all three imaginings a university model has emerged, which Cantwell and Taylor (2013) have named Global Research University (GRU). These institutions are globally networked, research-intensive, and deeply embedded in transnational circuits of funding, talent, and knowledge. Marginson (2010) describes GRUs as universities that operate across borders—attracting international staff and students, participating in global partnerships, and generating research visibility worldwide. They represent both an organisational ideal and a discursive construct through which the university is reimagined as a global actor.

The GRU is part of a broader lineage of institutional forms that have accompanied successive transformations of higher education. Delanty (2002) and Scott (2011) trace this genealogy through four revolutions in the modern university, from the German Humboldtian model centred on the unity of teaching and research, through the American civic and mass university phases of the twentieth century, to the marketised virtual university of the twenty-first century. The GRU extends this trajectory by fusing

research intensity, entrepreneurial rationalities, and international reach. It represents the latest articulation of the university's attempt to reconcile local commitments with transnational ambitions.

At a policy level, the GRU intersects with the notion of the World-Class University (Altbach & Salmi, 2011) and with what Mohrman, Ma, and Baker (2008) describe as the Emerging Global Model (EGM). These overlapping terms, GRU, WCU, EGM, have become shorthand for an idealised institutional form that stands at the forefront of global higher education. Although their terminologies differ, each captures the convergence of research excellence, global competitiveness, and organisational adaptability as the defining features of a university fit for the global age.

Across the literature, these concepts describe a shared institutional vision that has become emblematic of globalisation in higher education. The EGM represents an intensification and globalisation of the traditional research university. Rooted initially in the American experience of the late twentieth century, it embodies the fusion of scientific productivity, international engagement, and market responsiveness that now defines much of elite higher education worldwide (Baker, 2007a, 2007b; Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008). The EGM university is cast as a key mechanism for national and global progress through which societies invest in human capital and manage social and economic development through knowledge (Baker, 2007b). It is a rationalised and globally oriented organisation, where research is planned, evaluated, and mobilised as both a public and economic good.

In this rendering, the global university operates at a scale and intensity unprecedented in higher education. Its activities are defined by the relentless production of research,

often through large, interdisciplinary, and collaborative structures addressing “real-world” challenges. Faculty and researchers are reconfigured as entrepreneurial knowledge producers, working within international teams and networks that transcend disciplinary and national boundaries. The institutional culture is increasingly corporatised, dependent on competitive external funding, and governed through accountability and audit regimes that measure productivity and impact. These dynamics mirror what Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1998) term the “triple helix” relationship between universities, industry, and government, positioning higher education as a co-producer of innovation and economic growth.

The World-Class University (WCU) discourse further crystallises this ideal by positioning elite, comprehensive universities as benchmarks of global excellence. WCUs are typically large, research-intensive institutions that combine disciplinary breadth with high levels of selectivity and visibility (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). They are simultaneously national and global actors—serving as engines of innovation for their states while competing for prestige on international stages. Governments around the world have taken up the WCU concept as a strategic policy goal, China’s Double First-Class initiative, Germany’s Excellence Strategy, and more recently Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030. Such initiatives use rankings as both a measure of progress and a medium through which national ambition is articulated, linking global visibility with national development.

Current understanding of global university can be seen as the synthesis of these interrelated models. It combines the Humboldtian ideal of knowledge creation with the American entrepreneurial ethos and the neoliberal logic of competitiveness. GRUs

are internationally oriented institutions that recruit globally, publish predominantly in English, and collaborate through transnational networks of research and innovation (Marginson, 2010). Their organisational form is complex, layered, and hybrid as they incorporate interdisciplinary research centres, international branch campuses, and extensive digital infrastructures that extend their spatial reach. Managerial and accountability structures mirror those of corporations, emphasising measurable outcomes, brand reputation, and global benchmarking (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). Teaching and learning are reframed around employability, innovation, and global citizenship rather than purely educational or civic missions.

While only a small number of institutions fully embody the GRU model—perhaps a few dozen worldwide—its logics and symbols have diffused across the global sector therefore largely informing what it means to be global university. Higher education institutions everywhere adopt fragments of the model like strategic internationalisation, research commercialisation, English-medium publication, and global performance metrics. As a result, the global university operates both as a material reality and as a policy imaginary, a normative ideal that guides institutional aspiration and state investment (Peters, 2007; Altbach & Salmi, 2011). It functions as what Marginson (2018) calls a “template of excellence” that redefines what counts as success, modernity, and legitimacy in higher education.

Despite its prominence, scholars warn that the global university model privileges a narrow set of values and institutional forms. Waldow (2018) observes that “being global” has become a mode of distinction in itself, often conflating visibility with value. Critics point to the marginalisation of teaching, community engagement, and local

knowledge as universities orient towards international competition and measurable prestige (Deem et al., 2008; Salmi, 2009). The global research model also raises concerns about homogenisation, as universities around the world emulate Anglo-American norms of research publication, language, and governance (Jöns & Hoyler, 2013).

In sum, global league tables have reconstituted higher education as a competitive global field. They have introduced a transnational framework through which universities measure success and status, linking local institutional performance to global hierarchies of value. This transformation has paved the way for the emergence of a particular institutional archetype—the Global Research University (GRU)—which epitomises the ideals and practices that rankings privilege - research intensity, internationalisation, and measurable impact.

The GRU thus represents the most visible institutional expression of higher education's global turn. It is at once an organisational form, a political project, and a powerful imagining that shapes how universities are measured, funded, and understood to be global. However, the ascendancy of the GRU also narrows the conceptual horizon of the global university. It tends to equate globalness with a small group of large, research-intensive, and highly resourced institutions, thereby marginalising other universities whose global engagements may be more locally grounded, relational, or unevenly resourced. As a result, alternative ways of being global in higher education are rendered less visible or less legitimate or even impossible.

Critical Reflection

Taken together, the preceding review of the rhetoric of the global in higher education, the globalisation of HE, and the dominant framings of the “global university” shows that much of the field proceeds by reading effects as explanations. The idea of the global university is typically inferred from the most visible trends - mobility counts, cross-border partnerships, English-medium instruction, branding, and rankings. Subsequently, that our interpretation and arguably misunderstanding of globalisation is mainly formed through the consequences being observed across socio-economic as well as political spheres (Dodds, 2008). In this register, globalisation appears, first, as intensifying flows and interdependence among nations (Held & McGrew, 2007), and, second, as a bundle of period-specific sectoral shifts, what Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009) catalogue as the contemporary markers of a global knowledge economy. These accounts are descriptively powerful but conceptually thin, because they inventory ‘global’ change without clarifying what it means for universities to be global.

A central slippage concerns the conflation of globalisation with internationalisation. As the review demonstrated, internationalisation is best understood as a policy-driven organisational response expressed by multiple strategies through which institutions position themselves in relation to cross-border agendas (Enders & Fulton, 2002; Van der Wende, 2001). Treating these responses as if they were globalisation obscures process with outcome and practice with proxy. As Dale and Robertson (2003) put it, globalisation is too often “bolted on to, rather than integrated into, analyses of educational structures, policies and processes, and of the societies in which they are

embedded” (p. 3). This “bolt-on” tendency helps explain why the term global university frequently serves as a shorthand for a recognisable institutional profile (research-intensive, internationally branded, high status) rather than a theoretically specified object.

Two imaginaries organise this truncation. The economic imaginary casts universities as market actors in a global knowledge economy, valorising competitiveness, productivity, and revenue-seeking logics; the status imaginary frames institutions as entrants in a worldwide prestige race mediated by league tables. Both imaginaries privilege visible indicators and managerial programmes of change, and both reward institutional isomorphism. Yet neither, on its own, illuminates the social and spatial processes through which global is enacted in and through university places, nor the uneven power relations that contour those enactments. Put simply, prevailing framings tell us how universities appear when they claim to be global. They draw on taken-for-granted meanings circulating within the sector, rather than on a theorised understanding of what it means to be and to become global, thereby bypassing broader social and spatial debates about how “the global” is constituted and enacted in and through universities.

This is the conceptual gap that constrains the field. The review indicates that progress depends on moving from symptom-reading (treating outcomes as the global) to process-tracing (examining how global is constituted). Addressing the question “what does it mean to be global?” therefore requires a shift from cataloguing institutional responses to engaging the theoretical grammars that define the global as a set of relations, practices, and forms of consciousness, apposed to an attribute. A more open

and plural understanding of global being also releases universities from the shadow of narrowly economic and status-based imaginaries, enabling analyses that recognise multiple ways of world-making within higher education.

Accordingly, the next part of the thesis turns from sectoral description to conceptual specification. It first reviews scholarship on globalisation to clarify core distinctions (between global, globalisation, globality, and globalisms) and then develops the conceptual framework centred on the global imaginary and a relational understanding of space/place which anchors the subsequent analysis. By understanding globalisation as an ongoing process and the global university as something that is enacted, the study moves beyond visible indicators to examine how the global is lived, organised, and contested within the everyday institutional life of higher education.

2.6 Spatial and Relational Theories in Globalisation

The purpose of engaging the literature on globalisation is to establish a conceptual and analytical grounding for the global before ascribing “global” status to universities as institutions. Rather than examining only the thematic arenas in which universities engage the global, it is necessary to consider how higher education is positioned within theories of globalisation (Scott, 2011). Across disciplines, misconceptions about globalisation often stem from limited conceptualisation of the phenomenon and insufficient theoretical clarity about what ‘the global’ denotes (Axford, 2020; Curran, 2020).

In this thesis, the study of the global university is approached through the overarching concept of the global imaginary, drawn from global studies, alongside Massey’s (2005)

relational sense of place as a methodological orientation for developing a global sense of place. The literature indicates that imaginaries are rooted in the material flows and relations that constitute university life; accordingly, a spatial lens provides a way to inquire into the processes through which relations are made and sustained. This section therefore sets out the connections between the thematic concerns that follow and the theoretical perspectives that inform them.

Over the past four decades, globalisation has become a major focus of social theory, generating a vast array of perspectives on worldwide change. Early globalisation theories challenged nation-centric thinking by highlighting transnational flows of people, ideas, goods, and institutions across borders. These global perspectives provided new frameworks to address pressing issues – from climate change to financial crises – that transcend any single country. Yet globalisation remains a contested concept. Scholars have long disagreed on its definition, historical scope, central drivers, and consequences. The field’s evolution has thus been marked by ongoing debates of theorists grappling with globalisation’s complexity.

Globalisation and Key ‘Global’ Concepts

A persistent challenge for globalisation theory has been definitional precision. Basic terms have often been used loosely or interchangeably, undermining conceptual clarity. For example, even foundational words like “globalisation” and “globality” have been blurred together without careful distinction. Such imprecision led critics to

charge globalisation theorists with circular reasoning – making “globalisation” both the cause and effect of social change.

Globalisation is commonly understood as a profound intensification of worldwide interconnectedness across all aspects of social life. A widely cited definition by Held et al. (1999) captures this succinctly as a process of “the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnectedness”(p.15). In other words, social, economic, and political activities are no longer confined to local or national scales, but increasingly stretch across regions and continents. Held and colleagues emphasise that globalisation involves spatio-temporal processes of change that reorganise how human affairs are linked across distance. Their influential definition highlights multiple dimensions of globalisation – the *extensity* (stretching of social relations over space), *intensity* (the magnitude of interconnectedness), *velocity* (speed of interactions), and *impact* (the consequences of interconnection). Consequently, such theorisation underscores that to understand globalisation, one must consider how far-reaching connections are formed, how fast and intensely they operate, and how much they transform societies. This multi-dimensional view has made their definition foundational in globalisation studies, used and elaborated by many subsequent theorists.

Simultaneously, the concept of globalisation has been the subject of debate and clarification in sociological theory. Anthony Giddens (1990), for example, echoes the idea of stretched worldwide connections and provides a famously clear formulation. Giddens defines globalisation as

“the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (p.64)

In this view, globalisation is fundamentally about *interdependence at a distance*: what occurs in one place can be influenced by actors or forces in far-off locations, and local events can reverberate globally. Giddens argues that modern social life is increasingly “ordered across time and space” through processes of *time-space distanciation*, meaning social relations are lifted out of local contexts and restructured across much larger spans of geography and history. Notably, both Held et al. (1999) and Giddens (1990) draw attention to how “the local” and “the global” become interconnected – globalisation hinges on the local happenings and dynamics. Giddens also stresses that this is a multidimensional process whereby global forces reshape local contexts, but local responses and transformations in turn affect broader global patterns. Thus, defining globalisation involves recognising that the global is always intertwined with local, rather than assuming a one-directional homogenisation or local/global binary. It is important to note that these definitions express globalisation as a social process, not merely an economic trend or a cultural phenomenon. They have become influential because they encapsulate a key insight of late 20th-century social theory which gives rise to new social organisation.

Being such a complex phenomenon, globalisation and the global flows are difficult to capture as well as theorise (Steger, 2017). In response, scholars have sought to further clarify the field’s core concepts. Steger (2021) identifies four cornerstone “keywords” in globalisation theory – global, globalisation, globalism, and globality – each referring to

a different aspect of the phenomenon. Thesis builds on these terms to clarify analysis and “draw[s] analytical distinctions that help demarcate crucial aspects of the global” (p.3)

Global: Denotes an encompassing spatial scale and worldview beyond the nation-state. Unlike terms like “international” (which imply relations between separate nations), “global” signals planetary scope – processes and questions that span or connect across all local, national, and regional scales. In other words, the global comes to life through examining how events and dynamics play out across the world as a whole, cutting through the confines of methodological nationalism.

Globalisation: Refers to the processes by which the world becomes more integrated and interconnected. Etymologically “global-isation” implies a process (“-isation”) of becoming global. Globalisation can be conceived as the widening and deepening of interconnected social relations, together with shifts in how individuals and institutions perceive and experience the world across space and time. These processes unfold in patterns that can be observed historically. Crucially, globalisation is not a singular force but a multidimensional and uneven set of changes. It remains geographically uneven and incomplete, rather than a finished or uniform state of affairs. Globalisation also needs to be understood in its specific historical context (“world-time”), since different eras produce different forms of globalization shaped by power and circumstance.

Globality: Indicates the outcome or condition of broad global integration – a state in which the world is interlinked into a single place or social space. Globality can be thought of as the end-state that globalisation processes are moving toward. In

idealised terms, it evokes a cosmopolitan world of dense interconnectivity where national boundaries are weakened. However, globalisation theorists emphasise that globality is an evolving, “unfinished project” rather than a fully realised reality.

Different models of globality coexist. For instance, some define it as a consciousness of the world as one place, others as an objective social condition of supraterritorial connectivity, and others as a systemic network or structure (e.g. a global capitalist system). All these notions attempt to capture what a “globalised world” looks like.

Importantly, by conceptually separating globalisation (process) from globality (condition), theorists avoid conflating cause and effect. This addresses the earlier critique that globalisation theory was making globalisation the explanation for itself.

Distinguishing the global from globalisation, and both from globality and globalism, has brought much-needed conceptual discipline to globalisation studies. By using these terms with precision, scholars can specify whether they are discussing a spatial scale, a dynamic process, a resultant condition, or an ideological claim. This clarity allows globalisation theory to escape circular reasoning and engage more critically with how and why global change occurs. In short, tightening definitions has strengthened the field’s analytical rigor while underscoring that globalisation is a complex phenomenon involving objective processes and subjective interpretations alike. This conceptual foundation will guide the forthcoming analysis, providing a sociological lens to examine how globalisation is at play in the specific context of our study.

By highlighting the speeding up of interactions and the stretching of networks across distance, these definitions set the stage for understanding how “the global” itself comes

into being. The following sections unpack how various theorists have conceptualised the transformations in space, time, and social networks that constitute “the global” in the era of globalisation.

Space and Time in Globalisation

Central to theorising globalisation is the recognition that our experience of space and time is being transformed. Geographer Harvey (1990) was among the first to link the dynamics of late-modern capitalism to changes in space-time perception. He introduced the notion of time–space compression to describe how globalisation accelerates social life. In Harvey’s (1990) words, the acceleration of economic activities leads to the destruction of spatial barriers and distances – in effect, distant places are brought closer together in terms of the time it takes to communicate or perform transactions. Such phenomena make the world feel smaller and more immediate. According to Harvey, this compression of social time and space by rapid economic and technological activity is a driving force of contemporary globalisation. It means that the temporal cadence of life has quickened and geographical distances have, in practical terms, shrunk.

Giddens’ (1990) concept of time–space distancing complements Harvey’s view by describing how social systems span ever-greater distances. While Harvey speaks of compression (the world seeming to contract through speed), Giddens speaks of distancing – the stretching of social relations across time and space. Globalisation for Giddens involves lifting interactions out of immediate locales; relationships are

maintained across long distances and over longer timeframes than ever before. He also notes the role of expert systems and symbolic tokens (like money) in enabling this disembedding of social life from local context, allowing standardised interactions across the globe (for example, financial markets or technical standards facilitating global links). Both Harvey and Giddens, in different ways, draw attention to a core feature of “the global” - it is constituted through spatial and temporal reorganisation. Global social life is marked by distant simultaneity – events in one place can be experienced at the same moment elsewhere – and by the reordering of time. In result, as several theorists note, social relations and even personal identities are less anchored in any single place or traditional timeframe.

It’s also crucial to point out that this does not mean that distance and time cease to matter – rather, they matter in new ways. Harvey and Giddens would both agree that the *capacity* to overcome distance is uneven. Not everyone or every place experiences time-space compression equally. As Doreen Massey (2005) argues, the “annihilation of distance” is not a universal experience but is shaped by social power – some people (e.g. elites with access to technology and capital) can effectively “move” through space much more easily than others. Massey uses the term *power-geometry* to describe how different social groups have distinct positions in the flows and interconnections of globalization. We will return to Massey’s perspective later, but the key point here is: globalisation changes the meaning of space and time, creating the conditions for a new global arena of social life, yet these changes are complex and not uniform in their effects.

The Network Society and Global Flows

If globalisation is built on the stretching and speeding up of social relations, how exactly are those relations organized? One influential answer is through networks. Sociologist Castells (2011) argues that globalisation has given rise to a new social structure powered by information technologies and global communications, which he famously called a network society. In Castells' analysis, the global economy and society are characterised by "the almost instantaneous flow and exchange of information, capital, and cultural communication" (p.512) across vast distances. Because networks by definition cut across traditional boundaries, Castells notes that the network society is inherently global as networks are not bounded in the conventional sense, allowing functional integration on a world scale (a phenomenon he conceptualises as the "space of flows" replacing the space of places). In practical terms, this means production, communication, and even political power operate through global circuits. For example, a tech company's research, manufacturing, and customer service might be distributed in nodes across different continents but tightly linked in real-time, functioning as a unit. Culture and information similarly circulate instantly, creating transnational audience communities and norms.

Castells emphasises that these networks are not merely technical, they reflect and create distinctive social arrangements. Power in the global network society flows through those who control or have access to crucial networks – for instance, those with the ability to manage information systems or global financial instruments hold significant influence.

Notably, this shifts some power away from traditional nation-state hierarchies and corporations to more diffused network channels, at least conceptually. Castells observes that much of what happens in global networks operates beyond the full control of any single nation. For example, digital information flows or transnational capital movements evade many national regulations). In this sense, “the global” is constituted by networks that knit together distant actors, rather than by a simple aggregation of nation-states. The variant of globalisation that emerges is a web of interconnected places and people facilitated through nodes and links. Opposed to a set of distinct societies interacting at arm’s length. The global is enacted and enabled through and in the connections themselves.

From a macro-sociological standpoint, some scholars argue that these developments mark a new historical epoch. Robinson (2007) contends that globalisation represents a qualitative shift in the evolution of capitalism and society. He describes globalisation as a new epoch of world capitalism distinguished by a globally integrated production and financial system, an emergent transnational capitalist class, and incipient transnational state apparatuses. In Robinson’s view, what is emerging is a transnational configuration of power and governance that breaks with the old nation-centric order. For example, global supply chains now knit together production across many countries into one unified process, and we see the rise of institutions and agreements (from the World Trade Organization to climate accords) that attempt to govern issues on a global scale. A new class of elites operates in a transnational context, like multinational organisation, global financiers and cosmopolitan professionals. Interests of those are more aligned with the global market than any single country. This analysis reinforces

the idea that “the global” is not just an adjective, but a level of social reality being built through networks and structures that operate on a planetary scale. The constituting of the global happens through concrete mechanisms, global markets, transnational institutions, worldwide communications media, and also, crucially, through individuals who maintain these mechanisms. Robinson’s perspective adds that globalisation is not a neutral or automatic process; it is driven by specific social forces.

In summary, the network and transnational perspectives show how globalisation is institutionalised. In particular, how global social relations become stabilised in networks, flows, and structures that envelop the whole world. “The global” in this sense is an emergent level of social organisation. It is made up of interlinked nodes (cities, corporations, communities, even individuals) that interact faster and more broadly than ever before. These massive spatial and network transformations undeniably affect our notions of place, identity, and social space, more specifically the way we experience and conceptualise being part of a global world.

Constituting “The Global”: Space, Place, and Identity

The above theoretical discussion above urges that any notion of globalisation requires asking to ask how is “the global” itself produced in everyday life, and what does it mean for how we think about space and place? Many scholars argue that globalisation entails a reimagining of space – often described with terms like deterritorialisation, disembedding, or placelessness. Essentially, as social connections extend globally, some of the traditional anchors of identity and community (like locale or nation) are

loosened. For instance, Giddens noted that modernity “lifts out” social relations from local contexts – a process he calls disembedding – so that interactions can occur across vast distances. This can even be observed in virtual communities meeting with others around the world, or when a family maintains relationships via video calls across different countries. The sociologist Beck (2009) similarly described globalisation as creating a “second modernity” where national borders become porous and individuals live in transnational social spaces. Massey (2005) uses the term global sense of place to suggest that places themselves are now defined by their global interconnections rather than isolated uniqueness.

2.7 Globalisation as Social Practice: Local Agency in Global Connections

As noted, following the spatial and relational readings of globalisation, a significant shift in global studies has been to approach the global not as an abstract structural condition, but as something that is enacted through social practice. This move centres the agency of individuals, institutions, and places in making global connections, rather than viewing them as passive recipients of global forces. As James and Steger (2021) argue, globalisation should be seen as an outcome of countless situated actions and interactions, rather than as a singular, external force. It is “a social phenomenon emerging from within the practices of people, organisations, and networks” (p. 4) that, over time, become patterned as global. In this reading, globalisation is constantly performed through multiple and intersecting localities. In other words, what we call “global” is continuously performed and reproduced through localised events. From this viewpoint, there is no singular, domineering globalisation acting upon society, in

contrast there are myriad globalisation process emerging from below through multiple sites. Social agents translate and negotiate global connectivity in diverse ways, such that globalisation always exists in the plural.

Several theoretical frameworks exemplify this practice-centered view of globalisation. They shift the question from what globalisation is (in structural terms) to how it happens – through processes of translation, hybridisation, contestation and imagination that link different locales. Here we review four overlapping frameworks that illuminate the agency and locality in global dynamics - glocalisation, cosmopolitanism, grassroots globalisation (including Appadurai's “-scapes”), and global city formation. Together, these perspectives highlight that globalisation is enacted through relational and reflexive processes across scales. They also provide tools to analyse the global university as an active participant in globalisation, rather than a mere outcome of external pressures. Each framework contributes pieces to understanding how a university might perform global connectivity through its local practices, networks and identities.

This section brings together several frameworks that foreground this agentic, situated, and plural character of globalisation: glocalisation, cosmopolitanism, grassroots globalisation, and the imaginaries of -scapes and global cities. Collectively, these approaches shift the emphasis from what globalisation is to how it happens - through translation, mediation, and negotiation across scales. They expand the field beyond macro-economic determinism and open pathways for analysing the global university as an active participant in, rather than a passive outcome of, globalisation.

Glocalisation and the Co-Constitution of the Global and Local.

The term glocalisation – a hybrid of “global” and “local” – was popularised by sociologist Robertson (1995) to capture the intertwined processes by which the global and the local shape one another. In Robertson’s often cited formulation, “the global is not in and of itself counterposed to the local, but is realized through it”(p.30). In other words, globalisation does not entail a one-way flattening of local differences; rather, it produces new local formations even as it connects distant places. Every global form (whether a cultural product, a policy model, or an institutional practice) emerges in dialogue with particular local contexts. Robertson used this concept to challenge simplistic models of global homogenisation. He and other theorists showed that global flows always integrate to the grounded places and contexts (Robertson & White, 2003; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). Local actors interpret and reshape global influences to fit their own histories and needs, resulting in outcomes that are neither wholly global nor purely local but a mix of both.

Later scholarship has deepened the glocalisation concept as a two-way dialectic of scale. Sociologist Giulianotti (2016) describes globalisation as involving a “twofold dialectic of convergence and divergence,” (p.133) meaning that processes of becoming more alike and more different happen concurrently. The worldwide diffusion of a sporting culture like football, for instance, has led to common global norms of play and fandom, even as each country’s football culture retains distinctive features and fan traditions (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). Glocalisation theory thus rejects binary

between global unity and local diversity – it shows that globalisation is a product of that diversity, often by incorporating and even thriving on it. Recent contributions have also framed glocalisation in terms of hybridity and agency. Buhari-Gülmez (2021), for example, reconceptualises glocalisation as a critical “glocal-as-hybridity” perspective, highlighting the creative and sometimes contradictory processes through which local actors mediate global pressures. This approach stresses that local agents are critically and reflexively engaging with global norms, producing new hybrid forms that can even challenge global hegemonies. Likewise, James (2014) and James & Steger (2021) argue that glocalisation should be treated as a methodological principle for social analysis, one that sees all social phenomena as “co-temporal, multi-scalar, and spatially entangled.” In their view, every aspect of social life (economic, cultural, educational, etc.) is simultaneously shaped by local and global dynamics, and one cannot be understood without the other.

What does this mean for institutions like universities? A glocal lens implies that a “global university” is not simply a university that has expanded globally or adopted global standards. Rather, it is an institution that actively constitutes globalisation through its localised practices and relations. Universities may be embedded in global networks of knowledge, student mobility and policy models, but those global elements are always interpreted and implemented in specific campus contexts. For instance, an international curriculum at a university will inevitably reflect local priorities and pedagogies even as it aligns with global norms. Faculty and students take global ideas (like sustainability or human rights) and give them locally relevant meanings. Conversely, universities also carry their local ideas outward, contributing to global

discourses. In this sense, the global university can be seen as a glocal assemblage – it exists at the intersection of global flows and local particularities, constantly translating between the two. Glocalisation suggests that any global ‘symptoms’ in higher education such as establishing overseas partnerships, adopting world rankings criteria, or recruiting international students will be enabled and realised through human actors making up university locales. Thus, glocalisation undermines the notion of a one-size-fits-all global university model and suggests plurality of global university forms emerging from different local-global interactions.

Cosmopolitanism and Methodological Cosmopolitanisation

Another framework that brings agency and ethics into globalisation is cosmopolitanism. Traditionally, cosmopolitanism referred to the ideal of world citizenship – a moral or political stance that one’s identity and obligations extend beyond local or national boundaries to humanity as a whole. In recent decades, however, scholars like Ulrich Beck, Gerard Delanty, and others have reinterpreted cosmopolitanism as both an analytical perspective and a social process. Beck (2002) famously argued for “methodological cosmopolitanism” as an alternative to “methodological nationalism” in the social sciences. He observed that much social theory operates on the implicit assumption that society is bounded by the nation-state, with the nation being the primary unit of analysis). Methodological nationalism cannot capture phenomena that cut across national borders like climate change, global markets, transnational communities. Beck (2006) contended that we need a cosmopolitan outlook that “emerges from within” societies. In particular, looking at how global interconnectedness is generated in everyday life and how people

increasingly live in overlapping communities. In collaboration with Sznaider (2006, 2010), Beck introduced the term cosmopolitanisation to describe the internal globalisation of societies. By this he explains the process through which nation-states and local communities themselves become more diverse and outward-looking, incorporating global others and global concerns into their own fabric.

Cosmopolitanisation is essentially globalisation-from-within, driven by the realities of migration, global risks (like pandemics), digital communications, and cultural mixing that penetrate domestic life.

Importantly, cosmopolitanism in this sociological sense refers to material, lived processes of navigating cultural difference and global interdependence. Beck and Sznaider (2010) noted that even people who never travel and exercise their mobility may experience cosmopolitan realities. For instance, through exposure to global media or through the presence of diverse communities in their city, leading them to develop what Beck called a “cosmopolitan outlook” on politics and society. This outlook recognises that one’s local condition is affected by distant events and vice versa. It also carries a normative dimension of openness to others and a willingness to engage across cultural or spatial divides. As Delanty (2006, p. 25) puts it, cosmopolitanism is “a cultural model of openness” that is instantiated through communicative encounters and acts of translation between different perspectives. Delanty’s notion of the cosmopolitan imagination emphasises that cosmopolitanism is not a fixed identity or institution, but a dynamic process of world-making – a “form of cultural contestation in which the logic of translation plays a central role” (p.25) In other words, cosmopolitanism occurs when social actors reflect on their own place in the world,

engage with “others” on equal terms, and seek shared understandings or solutions that transcend parochial interests. It is inherently a spatial practice as well, since it often involves reconfiguring places (cities, universities, public spaces) into sites of global encounter rather than sealed-off locales.

In the university context, a cosmopolitan perspective helps to shift focus from seeing universities as competitors in a global market to seeing them as microcosms of global society and as agents of global responsibility. For example, universities nowadays often proclaim missions of cultivating global citizens and addressing global challenges.

Cosmopolitanism provides both a critique and a guide for such efforts. It reminds us that a truly “global” university is not just one with international students and partnerships, but one that institutionalises openness and reflexivity about global interdependence. This could mean fostering dialogues on campus between people of diverse backgrounds, incorporating multiple cultural perspectives in the curriculum, and encouraging critical reflection on how knowledge can serve global common goods.

Beck’s idea of “denationalised” is useful here, universities are places where national boundaries of thinking can be broken and new transnational publics formed (Beck & Sznaider 2006). However, cosmopolitan ideals also come with tensions – not least the challenge of avoiding a superficial “internationalisation” that ignores inequalities.

Methodological cosmopolitanism urges us to look at how universities negotiate belonging and difference, for example, how do students from different countries actually interact (or self-segregate) on campus? Do institutional policies truly empower marginalised voices or just celebrate diversity on surface? In summary, cosmopolitanism contributes an ethical and cultural lens to globalisation as social

practice, highlighting the need for openness, mutual learning, and reflexive awareness of our global interconnectedness in any institution that calls itself global. It underscores that globalisation, to be sustainable, must be grounded in everyday cosmopolitan practices of dialogue and inclusion, not simply in economic transactions. If glocalisation provides a framework for understanding the co-existence of global and local, cosmopolitanism offers a way to grasp how individuals and institutions negotiate those intersections ethically and culturally. Long associated with philosophical ideals of world citizenship, cosmopolitanism has re-emerged in sociology and political theory as a methodological and empirical tool for understanding global interconnectedness (Beck, 2002; Delanty, 2006; Skrbiš & Woodward, 2007).

Grassroots Globalisation and Imagined Worlds.

Building on these relational and reflexive approaches, notion of grassroots globalisation extends the analysis of agency by foregrounding the capacity of marginal and local actors to shape global flows. Anthropologist Appadurai (2001) coined the terms grassroots globalisation and “globalisation from below” to describe transnational connections and mobilisations that arise at the community level, often in resistance or alternative to elite-driven globalisation. As the mainstream discourse equated globalisation with market liberalisation and corporate expansion, Appadurai drew attention to how local groups like marginalised, indigenous communities, NGOs, and social movements were actively creating their own global networks in pursuit of justice or survival. He noted, for instance, how slum-dweller federations across countries

share strategies, or how movements link up via international forums to challenge WTO policies. He described these as alternative forms of globalisation that protect the vulnerable rather than exploiting them.

Appadurai proposes a bottom-up globalisation rooted in civic action, translocal solidarities, and community-based networks. He describes it as “a form of globalisation that seeks to protect the weakest and most vulnerable from the forces of globalisation itself” (Appadurai, 2001, p. 3).

This perspective reframes globalisation as a terrain of contestation where new political subjectivities and “designs for collective life” (Appadurai, 2001, p. 6) are continuously imagined and reimagined. Rather than viewing globalisation as homogenising, it acknowledges the multiplicity of global projects and the uneven geographies of participation. Grassroots globalisation thus resonates with decolonial and feminist critiques of global modernity, which emphasise the situated knowledges and micro-politics of resistance that produce alternative forms of the global (Escobar, 2018; Santos, 2014).

This view is especially relevant for higher education, where transnational inequalities are often reproduced through elite institutions and global rankings. By rethinking globalisation from below, scholars can uncover how local actors within universities including students and staff generate variant of globalisation that challenges dominant hierarchies. Initiatives such as indigenous knowledge partnerships, open-access movements, or regional academic consortia exemplify grassroots globalisations that pluralise the idea of the global university.

Central to Appadurai's analysis is the role of imagination and culture in globalisation. In his work "Modernity at Large" (1996), he proposed that globalisation is characterised by the proliferation of certain global cultural flows or "-scapes". His framework maps globalisation as a set of 5 disjunctive flows:

- ethnoscapas (flows of people, such as migrants or tourists),
- technoscapas (flows of technology and expertise),
- financescapas (flows of capital),
- mediascapas (flows of media images and information),
- ideoscapas (flows of ideas, ideologies and values).

These "scapes" are the building blocks of an interconnected world, but crucially, they are disjunctive, creating gaps and frictions between, economic flows and cultural identities. For example, a country might be integrated into global financial networks (financescape) while its people cling to distinct local beliefs (combination of ideoscape and ethnoscape). Appadurai argues that people make sense of these disjunctive flows through the work of imagination. The barrage of global media and mobility expands ordinary people's mental horizons – their capacity to envision lives and solidarities beyond their immediate locality. Imagination, he suggests, has become a collective social act, for example, migrants maintain ties to homelands through imagined communities, youth in remote areas imagine global pop culture worlds, activists imagine international alliances. Thus, globalisation is not only an economic or political phenomenon but also an experiential and cultural one, driven by myriad acts of imagining elsewhere and otherwise.

Taken together, grassroots globalisation and the -scapes of globalisation provide that the global emerges from local struggles, imaginaries, and practices of translation. It is an assemblage continually remade by social actors, and therefore open to reconfiguration. It invites us to look at the bottom-up global linkages that universities (and their constituents) engage in, beyond the official global strategies and status assumptions. For instance, student and faculty activism around global issues like climate issues, gender inequality and racism often connects campuses to worldwide movements. Consequently being a form of globalisation from within academia.

Likewise, scholars from the Global South forming their own research networks or open-access journals also represent efforts of globalisation and form of global. Thus, offering globalisation on more equal terms, countering the dominance of Western publishers and rankings. These are “globalisations from below” that may run parallel or counter to the market-driven globalisation of higher education. By recognising these, research can uncover plural “global university” models – including those that prioritise global justice, indigenous knowledge exchange, or regional cooperation, rather than just revenue and prestige. Furthermore, Appadurai’s emphasis on imagination suggests that imagining the global is consequential.

In connection with this, Appadurai’s “-scapes” remind us that different dimensions of globalisation may be experienced very differently by local actors. A university town might see an influx of international students and faculty (ethnoscape), adoption of new digital learning platforms from abroad (technoscape), greater reliance on global funding sources (financescape), exposure to foreign media and ideas on campus (mediascape and ideoscape) – all of which intersect in complex ways in daily campus

life. These flows can create tensions (e.g. financial pressures vs. academic values, or cultural clashes amidst diversity) and also creative possibilities (new cultural hybrids, innovation from diversity). By viewing the campus through the lens of overlapping “-scapes”, globalisation within a “local” university setting is multifaceted and not always coherent. It also foregrounds the question of power: whose imaginations and interests shape the global engagements of the university? Grassroots perspectives encourage to value the agency of the less powerful – for example, international students and junior scholars – in shaping what the global university could be, perhaps in ways administrators do not foresee. Ultimately, the notion of grassroots globalisation broadens the scope of inquiry to include civic and cultural globalisation (not just economic) and to highlight that globalisation’s direction can be contested and reimagined by local communities, including academic communities. As Appadurai notes, this requires “designs for collective life” that are imagined at the grassroots level and linked transnationally. Universities, potentially, are spaces where such alternative global designs can be nurtured – community projects, global service learning, or alliances with social movements – thereby enacting a more socially embedded form of globalisation.

Global Cities and the Infrastructure of Globalisation.

A final perspective to consider is the spatial-organisational framework provided by global city research (Sassen 1991, 2001) and the emerging literature on infrastructure and networks. Saskia Sassen’s work on global cities complements the above theories by showing how certain places themselves become key agents in global processes. In her classic study *The Global City* (1991), Sassen demonstrated that with the rise of

advanced producer services (finance, consulting, law, media), major cities became highly concentrated command points in the organisation of the world economy. Rather than dispersing economic activity evenly, globalisation led to a new geography of centralisation: leading firms clustered in a few cities to take advantage of specialised talent, financial systems, and telecommunications infrastructure, thus forming a global network of elite urban hubs. These “global cities” are characterised by both great wealth and stark inequalities, as they draw in high-level professionals from around the world and low-wage immigrant workers, producing an internal polarisation (the familiar skyscraper-and-slum contrast). While initially an economic thesis, Sassen’s idea has evolved to highlight the sociopolitical role of global cities. She notes that such cities have “denationalised” urban spaces where new transnational actors (global capital, international NGOs, diasporic communities) make new claims that bypass the nation-state. For instance, immigrants in a global city may form alliances and identities that link them to multiple countries, thus challenging the notion that a city’s “locals” are only members of one nation. Sassen observed that “the global city has emerged as a site for new norms and identities” (p.16) – a place where global civil society can have a foothold, where questions like “whose city is this?” are negotiated among diverse stakeholders. Thus, global cities are not just economic nodes; they are strategic sites of globalisation in social, cultural and political terms. They localise global challenges (inequality, migration, climate risk) and also localise global innovations (new art, new social movements, new lifestyle trends), acting as microcosms of global complexity. Crucially, they also connect with each other in networks – flows of capital, information and people link New York to London to Hong

Kong, etc., forming what Taylor (2004) called a world city network. In this sense, the space of global flows is often an urban network space, a point that underscores how material infrastructure (airports, fiber-optics, stock exchanges) and urban culture combine to enable globalization.

Why is this relevant to the globalisation of social practices and specifically to universities? Firstly, many globally oriented universities are located in these very global cities or aspire to emulate their dynamics. Such universities serve as knowledge hubs within global city circuits – they attract international students and faculty, liaise with multinational firms and NGOs, and often have considerable cultural cachet. Sassen (2007, 2018) herself has noted that universities, along with other institutions, contribute to “global circuits of knowledge” that tie cities together. For example, a research university in London might collaborate with counterparts in Singapore and New York on a project, effectively knitting those cities into a knowledge network (often reinforced by physical exchanges like conferences and digital infrastructure for data-sharing). Moreover, universities in global cities frequently become sites of global norm-making. They host international conferences that generate new ideas, they produce graduates who go on to international careers, and they may set trends in global higher education (think of how the English-language university model has spread). In these ways, universities act as infrastructures of globalisation themselves. Here we can draw on the broader insight from science and technology studies that infrastructures (physical or institutional) are not neutral backdrops but active mediators. Scholars like Larkin (2013) have argued that infrastructure has a politics and poetics – it shapes how people connect, what paths are possible, and who is included

or excluded. For instance, the availability of high-speed internet (an infrastructure) can determine whether a university can be part of global research collaborations. Campus buildings designed as multi-cultural spaces versus closed colleges can affect whether global mixing happens. Even bureaucratic systems (like visa offices or international student services) are infrastructures that condition the experience of globalisation on campus. The agency of infrastructure means that material arrangements – from transport links to digital libraries – significantly influence how global flows are realised in practice.

Global city theory thus enriches the picture by adding a concrete spatial and material dimension. It reminds us that place still matters, but in new ways: certain places (cities, and by extension key institutions in those cities) function as switching points for global networks. For a global university, this might entail leveraging its location to act as a convenor of global conversations, or conversely, recognising that being outside such hubs may require creative strategies to plug into global networks. It also foregrounds the inequalities and power-geometries involved – e.g., universities in the Global South often struggle to achieve “global” status due to less favourable infrastructural positioning, and they may face having their talent drained to global city universities elsewhere. Recognising this can push academics and policymakers to question and possibly rewire those circuits (for instance, by investing in digital connectivity and partnerships that strengthen peripheral institutions). Finally, global city analysis merges with glocal and cosmopolitan perspectives by showing that the global is always embedded in the local infrastructure. A city like Nairobi or Bangalore might develop its own kind of global city status through tech hubs or educational

centers that reflect distinctly local-global synthesis (such as “Silicon Savannah” in Nairobi). Universities often anchor these developments (e.g. Stanford’s role in Silicon Valley, or IITs in India’s tech regions). Thus, by studying universities as part of their urban and infrastructural context, we see more clearly how globalisation is concretely accomplished – through buildings, technologies, urban policies, and human networks that collectively enable a sense of a smaller world.

Towards a Situated Understanding of the Global.

Across the above frameworks – glocalisation, cosmopolitanism, grassroots globalisation, and global city networks – we can observe global as socially constructed. Whereas, globalisation, in this light, is not a singular tidal wave washing over humanity; it is more like a fabric woven from countless threads of connection, each thread originating in a specific locale and moment. This perspective carries significant implications for how we conceptualise global institutions such as the university. It suggests that rather than defining a “global university” only by quantitative metrics (international student ratios, overseas branches, world ranking positions), we should define it by its social capital enacting global – that is, to foster relationships, practices, and knowledge flows that genuinely span and integrate across scales. In short, a truly global university could be seen as an assemblage of glocal practices (Robertson, 1995), cosmopolitan encounters (Delanty, 2006), grassroots initiatives (Appadurai, 2001), and urban/infrastructural linkages (Sassen, 2007) – all of which together produce its “global” character.

Adopting this situated, practice-oriented understanding also highlights the plurality and contingency of globalisation in higher education. It challenges us to move beyond one-dimensional narratives (e.g. “neoliberal globalisation is making universities all the same”) and instead examine the specific configurations in each case: How do global economic pressures intersect with local academic cultures? Where do we see homogenisation (perhaps in adopting English as the medium of instruction) coexisting with heterogenisation (unique local research agendas or pedagogies)? How do universities from different regions forge alternative global networks (for instance, the rise of regional university associations in Asia, Africa, Latin America that set their own priorities)? By acknowledging these variations, we can better identify the literature gaps in our current understanding – for example, the need to theorise what a “global university” looks like outside the Anglo-American paradigm. The review above paves sets foundation for reconceptualisation of the global university as a relational entity constituted through the interplay of local and global dynamics.

In conclusion, recent theoretical debates move us towards seeing globalisation as an embodied social practice – something people and institutions do, in specific places and through particular relationships, rather than something that happens to them. This shift in perspective is essential for framing the present study’s approach to the “global university.” It means that to understand a university’s global dimension, one must investigate its on-the-ground practices like its curricula, community engagements, spatial design, networks of collaboration, values and imaginaries. These are the arenas where globalisation is realised or resisted daily. The literature reviewed – spanning human geography, sociology, anthropology and education – provides conceptual tools

to analyse these arenas. It justifies a research focus on “global-through-the-local,” asserting that the most meaningful insights into globalisation (and by extension, into what a global university is) often come from examining how global logics are localised, translated and transformed within institutional and community contexts. By building on these insights, the following section will articulate a framework for studying the global university as a situated phenomenon – one that is globally connected yet locally embedded, and whose global character is continually negotiated through practice. This approach aims to fill the literature gap by offering a more nuanced, practice-based understanding of global higher education in an era of complex globalisation.

2.8 Conceptual Gaps: Toward Relational Understandings

The literature demonstrates that universities have been profoundly reshaped by globalisation (Dill, 2013; Lauder et al., 2006; Maringe & Foskett, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2000; Scott, 2000, 2011; Vaira, 2004). Yet, while the broad effects of globalisation are well documented, far less attention has been paid to how these changes take place — to the spatial, material, and relational processes through which global transformations are enacted within universities (Barnett, 2013, 2015; Delanty, 2001, 2020; Temple, 2008). What remains largely absent are micro-level accounts of how the “global condition” is produced, experienced, and negotiated in everyday university life.

To address this absence, researchers have turned to a range of new perspectives. Some focus on the physical form and design of the university (Temple, 2008; Benneworth, 2014); others explore its spatiality, seeing the university as a networked assemblage of relations rather than a fixed institution (Matus & Talburt, 2009, 2015). Discourse-based

studies have traced how global imaginaries are constructed through policy and governance (Avigur-Eshel & Berkovich, 2019; Borkovic et al., 2020; Kleimann, 2019; Schmidt, 2010; Wu & Vong, 2017), while a smaller body of work considers space and place together, examining how the material and symbolic dimensions of the university interact (Choi et al., 2019; Flint, 2021; Livingstone, 2010). Collectively, these approaches reveal that understanding the university's transformation under globalisation requires attention to its spatial configurations and relational entanglements.

Universities as Spatial and Relational Formations

Research increasingly recognises that knowledge and innovation are produced through interaction and co-presence (Florida, 2005; Heffernan et al., 2018; Meusburger, 2018). Universities function as dense “knowledge environments,” where ideas are generated through the relations between people, technologies, and the spaces that contain them. The material and architectural conditions of the university—its campuses, laboratories, and urban settings—shape how collaboration, learning, and discovery occur (Collins, 1983; Temple, 2008; Skogland & Hansen, 2017). As Livingstone (2010, p. 18) reminds us, “scientific knowledge is a geographical phenomenon.”

Adopting a place-based perspective thus shifts attention from global processes as distant forces to the situated ways they are experienced and re-created. This approach highlights how universities are not only influenced by globalisation but actively produce it through local practices and spatial arrangements (Cresswell, 2004; Goddard, 2018; Usher, 2002). Knowledge travels across boundaries, transforming spaces along

the way, yet it remains shaped by the institutions and communities that generate it. Studies linking universities to urban and regional development illustrate this relational logic: universities are “agents of knowledge-based development in the economic and political spaces of regions” (Goddard & Vallance, 2013, p. 1). Their impact extends beyond their campuses to social, cultural, economic, and environmental transformations in surrounding areas (Benneworth et al., 2010; Bott, 2018). Such findings have inspired calls for universities to be imagined not as abstract spaces of global connectivity but as relational hubs that mediate between the local and the global (Harvey, 2013; Zukin, 2011). Universities, as Goddard (2018) and Meusburger (2018) argue, can be understood through the flows of people, knowledge, and resources that circulate through them. Analysing these flows provides insight into both their current operations and the forms of collaboration and spatial organisation that may define their future.

The Place of the Global in Higher Education

Despite the breadth of scholarship, a central limitation persists: much of the existing literature conceptualises globalisation in higher education through policy frameworks and abstract discourse rather than through the spatial, material, and relational practices that make the “global” real. While studies have illuminated the symbolic and strategic dimensions of globalisation, they often overlook the embodied, affective, and situated experiences of those who live and work within global universities (Robertson et al., 2016; Cochrane & Williams, 2013; Grau, 2016).

This gap points to the need for a relational understanding of globalisation - one that acknowledges the global as something continually produced through local interactions, spatial practices, and material arrangements. As Sassen (2021) argues, global processes do not begin as global; they become global through the cumulative effects of situated actions and relations. Recognising this shifts the analytical lens from macro-level abstractions to the lived realities and entanglements that constitute global higher education.

Dominant Paradigm	Problem	Conceptual Reorientation
Globalisation framed through discourse and policy	Over-reliance on representation, abstraction, and measurement	Reimagine globalisation as relational, material, and situated
Higher education studies privileging managerial/global imaginaries	Neglect of spatial, affective, and embodied dimensions	Move toward spatial-relational perspectives
Research grounded in humanist epistemologies	Assumes coherent subjects and bounded institutions	Adopt approaches tracing assemblages of space, matter, and meaning

Table 2 - Dominant Paradigms in Global HE

Across these paradigms, the literature reveals absence of frameworks that can account for how “the global” is produced, lived, and materialised within the everyday life of universities.

Grounding the Conceptual Framework

This gap gives rise to the central proposition of this thesis, that understanding the global university requires moving beyond institutional and policy narratives toward a relational conception attentive to space, place, and material entanglements. The literature review has traced how dominant theories of globalisation, higher education

policy, and spatial thinking have evolved, and how each, in their own way, struggles to capture the relational and embodied realities of global higher education. In response, this thesis situates its inquiry within England and examines three universities as distinct locales to explore how the global is produced from within institutional spaces. The global imaginary is advanced as a key analytical variable for this task, while a relational sense of space provides the methodological means to follow the making of relations across sites and scales.

Three key theoretical strands emerge as the foundation for the conceptual framework developed in the next chapter:

The Global Imaginary – understanding globalisation as a social and cultural construct that are shaped and created within universities.

Relational Space – following Massey (2005) and others, recognising space and place as dynamic products of interaction, where global and local processes co-constitute one another.

Taken together, these perspectives move the study of global higher education from an abstract discourse of globalisation toward a grounded exploration of how globality is made. They provide the theoretical architecture for a relational, post-qualitative understanding of the university as both a space of flows and a place of practices — one that is always in the process of becoming global.

3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study establishes an integrated lens to reimagine the “global university” as a product of both imaginative constructs and spatial practices. This framework posits that “the global” is continually produced from within universities, through local interactions, spatial arrangements, and material engagements. It thus shifts the analytical focus from disembodied discourse to the lived realities of global higher education, examining how global processes are experienced and enacted in specific places. By doing so, the framework moves beyond reductive approaches and towards a spatial understanding of the global university.

Two central concepts ground this framework: the global imaginary and space-place. The global imaginary refers to the shared social imagination of “the global” – the collective ways people envision worldwide community, globalisation, and the role of universities in a global context. In contrast to the scholarly work in the field of global HE which focuses on the already made imaginaries and the outcomes, this work locates global in the making of imaginaries, avoiding the inclusion/exclusion of what they are/should be. It thereby views globalisation as produced from within and as part of universities, instead of separating the globalisation logistics from the institutional spaces. Such rationing is enabled through the relational sense of places developed by Doreen Massey (2005) which would understand global university as a process that is actively enacted and always evolving. Space-place, drawn from Doreen Massey’s relational theory of space, refers to an understanding of space and place as dynamic and interconnected – “the product of interrelations” and “always in the process of being made” (p.9) Together, these concepts allow us to reconceptualise a

university not as a static institution influenced by a global force, but as a node where global imaginaries and local places continuously interact. The framework thus bridges macro-level ideas with micro-level practices, showing how global visions are materialised in campus spaces and daily practices, and conversely how local spatial realities inform and reshape the global imaginary.

This chapter unfolds in four sections. First, the notion of the global imaginary is introduced, including its roots in the theory of social imaginaries (Taylor, Castoriadis) and its contemporary application to globalisation (Steger, Kamola, Appadurai). Next, the concept of space and place is explained through Massey's relational spatial theory, highlighting place as open, interactive, and constituted by flows. The third section examines the interactions between the global imaginary and space-place, demonstrating how these two dimensions entwine to produce the "global university." Throughout, the chapter also clarifies the role of this conceptual framework in the study's design and methodology. Particularly, these concepts are not only theoretical lenses but enacted as methods in a post-qualitative, new materialist inquiry. In other words, the study "thinks with" these concepts (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), using them as analytical tools to generate and interpret data in novel ways. By employing concepts as lived, dynamic elements rather than static categories, the framework ensures theoretical depth while remaining practically usable and grounded. Ultimately, this conceptual framework provides the study with a coherent worldview that connects the literature review to the methodology, and later guides the analysis of findings and the discussion of what a "global university" entails in relational, spatial, and embodied terms.

3.1 The Global Imaginary

The term “imaginary” in social theory refers to the deep-seated patterns of understanding that shape how people collectively envision their social existence. It was first theorised by Cornelius Castoriadis, who described the imaginary as fundamentally “the capacity to see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is” (1997, p.127). In other words, imaginaries enable people to imagine new possibilities beyond the given reality – they are a creative and constitutive force in society. Charles Taylor further developed this idea as the social imaginary, meaning the shared background understanding that makes social practices and legitimacy possible. Taylor famously emphasised that a social imaginary “is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society” (C. Taylor, 2002, p. 91). According to Taylor (2004), a social imaginary represents a framework that is at once descriptive and prescriptive of the conceptions of how things work and how practice is organised around a set of norms that provides them with meaning. The idea of social imaginary involves a complex, unstructured and contingent mix of the empirical and the affective in contrast to “fully articulated understanding of our whole situation within which particular features of our world become evident” (Taylor 2004, p. 21). In this sense, the idea of social imaginary describes a social phenomenon that is tacit and unconscious, and is adhered to by a group of people in an un-reflexive manner. Social imaginary is a way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people. It consists in the common understandings that make everyday practices possible, giving them sense and legitimacy. In this regard, a social imaginary is embedded in ideas, practices and

events, and carries within it deeper normative notions and images, constitutive of a society.

It encompasses the intuitions, images, and narratives by which a community imagines “how we fit together” and how life should go on. Crucially, these imaginaries are not held only by theorists or elites; they are carried by ordinary people in stories, symbols, expectations. A social imaginary thus “legitimises the way people imagine as well as conduct their social life” (C. Taylor, 2002, p.92), providing a sense of what is normal, possible, and desirable in a given social world.

Steger (2008) explains “global imaginary” as a sense of world community that is achieved mainly through the networked, spatial dynamics of society. In essence, global imaginary, therefore, informs the very terrain within which humans and non-humans inhabit the world, informing how people interact with each other, what decisions are made and how societies organise themselves through the relations they encounter. It is a shared sense of a widening world community that has arisen in recent decades with intensified global connectivity. This concept extends Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities (originally applied to nations) to the planetary scale. As national boundaries are traversed by media, migration, and markets, people increasingly envision themselves as part of an interconnected world. The global imaginary is essentially the way globalisation is experienced and understood at a collective level. It is the repertoire of images, ideas, values, and symbols through which “the global” is imagined. For example, the popular trope of the “global citizen” or a “borderless world” reflects elements of a global imaginary. Steger notes that this global consciousness has been “thickening” – especially via digital communication and

transnational flows – leading to new forms of solidarity as well as new anxieties.

Importantly, the global imaginary is not purely ideational but has a material dimension as it is shaped by and manifested in concrete social and spatial dynamics. Steger emphasises that the global imaginary is enacted through the networked, spatial interactions of contemporary society. In other words, the sense of a global world emerges from myriad connected practices – from travel and trade to internet communications – that make the idea of “one world” tangible in everyday life.

Global Imaginary in Higher Education

The global imaginary plays a powerful role in shaping how universities conceive their purpose and identity in a global age. Kamola (2014) in analysis of U.S. universities, illustrates that what we often call globalisation in HE is underpinned by a worldview – a global imaginary – that universities themselves actively construct through discourse and practice. This imaginary frames what a “global university” should look like (e.g. diverse campuses, international partnerships, world-class rankings) and what purposes it should serve (e.g. educating global citizens, driving a knowledge economy).

Crucially, Kamola reminds us that the dominant global imaginary is not a neutral reflection of reality, but “a world-view produced and reproduced within contradictory and contested political and economic relations” (2014, p. 529). In other words, how we imagine the global university is shaped by power structures – for instance, neoliberal ideologies, colonial histories, and market logics – even as it appears to be a universal ideal. By “demystifying” the global imaginary, we see that it often advances particular interests (e.g. competition, commodification of education) under the guise of inevitability or progress. Kamola (2014) and others link the rise of a global imaginary in

HE to neoliberal transformations in the late 20th century. As universities embraced market-oriented reforms and rankings, a narrative of global competitiveness and excellence took hold – an imaginary in which universities worldwide are hierarchically compared and compelled to “innovate” or perish. Scholars have termed this the neoliberal imaginary of higher education, characterised by privatisation, managerialism, and an economic view of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The conceptual framework of this study critically engages with these ideas. Hence, it treats the global imaginary not as given truth, but as an object of inquiry – asking whose global visions dominate, how they shape institutional practices, and what alternatives might be imagined.

At the same time, the global imaginary is understood here in a broad and dynamic sense, not merely as the neoliberal script. Following Taylor and Castoriadis, imaginaries also contain creative potential – the ability to envision alternatives and new futures. Kamola (2014) notes that social imaginaries set the horizons of “what alternatives might be possible” (p.526). Thus, while one task is to critique the dominant global imaginary in HE, another is to consider how a different imaginary of globalisation could emerge (for instance, a more inclusive or decolonial global imaginary, as some authors suggest). Indeed, this study’s title, “The Global University Reimagined,” signals an attempt to envisage globalisation in higher education differently – through a relational and spatial lens – thereby expanding the imaginary beyond entrenched neoliberal tropes.

Appadurai and the Imagination as Social Practice

In further grounding the concept of global imaginary, Arjun Appadurai's work provides valuable insight. Appadurai observes that under conditions of globalisation, "the imagination has become an organised field of social practices ... and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (p.5). In plain terms, imagination is no longer a private fantasy or "mere contemplation" (p.4); it has become central to how people craft their social realities in a global context. Migrants dreaming of opportunities abroad, students envisioning a cosmopolitan identity, or universities crafting narratives of global prestige – all are exercising a collective imagination that connects personal agency with global frames of reference. Appadurai's emphasis on imagination as work and negotiation underscores that the global imaginary is actively produced as individuals and institutions continually absorb and contest global ideas, images, and ideologies to make meaning in their own context. The global imaginary is not static or monolithic; it is something people do. It is embodied and performed – in institutional mission statements, campus events, international collaborations, or even the architecture of new "global campuses." It is also inherently partial and contested, students and staff in an English university might embrace certain elements of the global imaginary (e.g. diversity, global responsibility) while resisting or reshaping others (e.g. questioning the primacy of global rankings or Eurocentric models). The conceptual framework thus treats the global imaginary as a multifaceted, spatial-relational imaginary – one that is entangled with the physical spaces and human practices of the university.

In summary, the global imaginary in this study refers to the shared social imaginary of globalisation in higher education. Drawing on theorists like Taylor, Castoriadis, Steger and Kamola, it is defined as the collective imagination that underpins how we understand global connectedness, world community, and the role of the university in the world. This imaginary shapes not only grand narratives (about, say, the “knowledge economy” or “global citizenship”) but also everyday decisions and interactions within universities. It creates a backdrop of meaning against which policies are made and experiences are interpreted. However, rather than treating this imaginary as a fixed background, the framework probes it as an active, contested terrain.

In effect throughout the work, it poses: *How is the global imaginary constructed and reinforced in university life? How does it influence spatial practices? And how might engaging with space and place differently alter that imaginary?*

These questions lead directly to the second key concept – space and place – which provides the necessary relational perspective to examine globalisation as something made and lived.

3.2 Space and Place (Massey’s Relational Perspective)

Despite the more recent scholarly debate discussed in previous chapter, conventional discourse often still portrays the global and the local as opposing scales. The “global” is the realm of flows, networks, and mobility, whereas the “local” (or place) is seen as bounded, static, even parochial. In studies of globalisation in higher education, this has translated into an emphasis on global trends and benchmarks at the expense of local

context – effectively treating universities as if location does not matter in the face of global forces. Massey identifies this as an “a-spatial imagination” of globalisation. It assumes that the global is a uniform force that simply descends upon places, rendering them irrelevant or homogenised. Such thinking, Massey argues, “obliterates the spatial into the temporal” (p.8) – meaning it interprets differences between places as mere stages in a single timeline of development. For example, a university in England might be seen as “ahead” in globalisation and another in a developing country “behind,” rather than recognising them as contemporaries in distinct relations. This study rejects that binary. Instead, it adopts Doreen Massey’s relational understanding that the global and the local are always mutually constituted through space. We cannot speak of globalisation meaningfully without talking about the specific places where global relations are realised.

Relational Sense of Place

Doreen Massey, a human geographer, provides three fundamental propositions for reconceptualising space and place, which give global sense to university:

- as the product of interrelations, themselves constituted through interaction.
- as a sphere of multiplicity in which distinct trajectories and heterogeneity co-exist;
- as always in the process of being made. (2005, p. 9)

First, social space is the product of interrelations. Rather than a static container or backdrop, space exists only through relationships – connections among people, objects, and events. These relations are embedded practices (social, material, cultural interactions) that literally produce space.

Second, space is a sphere of multiplicity, a simultaneity of “stories-so-far.” In Massey’s words, space is “a sphere of multiplicity; a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (p.10). This highlights that space contains diverse trajectories and histories co-existing at once. Any given place is filled with many strands of activity and meaning, woven together in the present.

Third, space (and place) is always under construction – always in the process of being made. Places are not eternally fixed; they are ongoing events, “a constellation of processes rather than a thing” (p.10). In short, place is dynamic, open, and relational.

Massey famously describes places as “meeting points” where various streams of relations (local and global) are thrown together by chance and design. This “throwntogetherness” means that any place – a city, a neighbourhood, a university campus – is a mix of people, ideas, and influences from elsewhere, coexisting and negotiating in one locale.

Engaging with these ideas, we arrive at a “global sense of place” (Massey, 1994) – an understanding that even the most local of places are tied into wider relations. In her own words:

“It is a sense of place, an understanding of 'its character', which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place

would recognize that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place” (Massey, 1994, p.9)

For an English university, this means recognising that what happens on campus (the courses taught, the students present, the research pursued) is profoundly shaped by global interconnections. The campus might host international students, engage in research networks spanning continents, depend on funding flows and technologies that are global in scope. Far from being a self-contained ivory tower, it is constituted through those global connections. Conversely, those global processes materialise through the campus itself: e.g., an international partnership isn't abstract – it takes form in a classroom with remote video links, in faculty travel, in curricular changes. Place is where globalisation happens.

By adopting Massey's relational lens, the framework challenges any depiction of the global university as an “abstract space of flows” detached from physical context. Instead, a university is understood as a place of practices and a space of flows. It is simultaneously local and global. According to Massey (2005) the local is not the opposite of the global but its constitutive part.

Every local campus is a unique knot of wider relations – “a constellation of trajectories” (p.12) shaped by social, cultural, and economic forces at multiple scales.

This perspective has several important implications:

1. We pay attention to how space is actively made through practice. This means looking at mundane activities (teaching, meetings, student gatherings, use of campus spaces) as creating the space of the university. The framework aligns with new materialist ideas that non-human elements (architectures, technologies, infrastructure) are participants in this process. Buildings, digital platforms, campus layouts – all have agency in how global connectivity is facilitated or hindered. By considering material entanglements, we acknowledge that a videoconferencing system or a research lab can be as crucial to “global” education as a policy document. Space is thus viewed not as empty stage but as an assemblage of human and non-human actors intra-acting (Barad, 2007) to produce particular outcomes.
2. Massey’s concept of power-geometry is salient here. Even though space is made of relations, not everyone is positioned equally in those relations. Different actors have different mobility, access, and influence in space. For example, in the global university context, an international PhD student, a vice-chancellor, a local community member, and a piece of educational technology all occupy very different “locations” in the web of relations. Massey notes that power is always part of spatial negotiations – some trajectories dominate or marginalise others. A practical example is how global league tables and rankings (a feature of the global imaginary) organise space such that resources and prestige flow predominantly to certain “world-class” institutions, often at the expense of

others. Within a university, globalisation might empower those who can travel, publish internationally, or attract foreign students, while those rooted in local duties or less valued roles may feel sidelined. Space, in this sense, is political, it is “a cartography of power” within the institution.

3. Because places are “throwntogether” composites, they require ongoing negotiation. A university, seen as a place where many paths and agendas intersect, is full of negotiations. For instance, global versus local priorities, diverse cultural expectations, competing uses of space. Rather than assuming a harmonious global campus, the framework views the university as an arena of continuous spatial struggle and dialogue. For instance, the push for internationalisation might conflict with local community commitments; the drive for digital global reach might clash with the need for in-person care and teaching. Such tensions are not failures but normal features of a place in process. They indicate that the global is being worked out on the ground, not simply implemented. This study, therefore, looks for these moments of negotiation as rich sites of insight – where the global imaginary meets local reality and something new might be learned or created.

In sum, Massey’s relational space-place concept equips this study with a way to “ground” the global imaginary. It ensures that when we talk about the global, we always ask: “Where is this happening? How is it happening in this specific

somewhere?” By doing so, we link broad imaginaries to tangible, observable phenomena. This addresses the literature gap directly, rather than accepting globalisation in HE as an abstract trend, we explore how it is lived and materialised within the everyday life of universities. The conceptual framework thus stands on two pillars – the global imaginary and relational space-place – and the next section will explore how these pillars lean into each other.

3.3 Interactions Between Global Imaginary and Space-Place

Bringing together the above concepts, the framework conceives the global university as an emergent intersection of imaginary and place. The global imaginary provides the visions, meanings, and motivations; space-place provides the situated processes and practices. The two are in constant interplay, each shaping and being shaped by the other. This interaction can be summarised in a simple dynamic - the global imaginary is enacted in space, and spatial practices in turn infuse and reshape the global imaginary.

The global imaginary (shared ideas, ideologies, and visions of the global role of universities) and relational space-place (the material, local contexts and spatial practices of university life) continuously interact and co-constitute one another. The global imaginary informs how university spaces are configured and experienced, while those spatial and material practices in turn ground and sometimes challenge the imaginary. This dynamic relationship underpins the study’s approach, emphasising

that globalisation in higher education is both imagined and enacted through space and place.

In practical terms, this means the research looks at phenomena such as: How do global ideas manifest in the built environment and routines of a university? For example, if a university imagines itself as a “global knowledge hub,” we might see physical evidence – perhaps an “International Campus” building, signage in multiple languages, or globally themed events. These spatial/material arrangements are the global imaginary taking form. They are the imaginary made concrete, what Taylor would call making sense in practice. In short, place-based experiences feed back into the imaginary. As Saskia Sassen (2021) argues, global processes become global through the cumulative effects of situated actions and relations. Each local action (a researcher forming a partnership abroad, a student club hosting an intercultural festival, an IT team extending Wi-Fi across campus) might seem small, but collectively these add up to the reality of globalisation. Thus, by studying such actions in context, we see how the global is actually composed.

One concrete illustration of imaginary–space interplay is the pursuit of “world-class” status. The world-class university is a powerful imaginary circulating worldwide – conjuring images of excellence, international renown, cutting-edge research. This imaginary drives universities to make specific spatial changes: building high-tech labs and international student centres, forging global campuses or satellite centres, and reconfiguring curricula to include global content. For instance, an English university might establish a new “Global Engagement Office” (a space and an institutional unit) as a material commitment to that imaginary. Classrooms may be equipped with

telepresence technology to enable global learning. These changes materialise the global imaginary on campus – students and staff can literally see and inhabit the changes. At the same time, the success or ambivalence of these spatial strategies can modify the imaginary. If the “world-class” investments lead to unintended consequences (say, underutilised spaces or local community pushback), stakeholders might begin to reimagine what “global” excellence means beyond just copying a global template. They might incorporate more place-based values, realising that being global also requires being locally relevant (a nuance Massey’s perspective encourages). In this way, spatial experience becomes a feedback loop that can reinforce or adjust the prevailing imaginary.

Crucially, this framework serves to bridge the literature review and the rest of the thesis. The literature review highlighted how prior research often left a conceptual gap – it did not explain how globalisation is lived and constructed inside universities. Here, by articulating the global imaginary and space-place interplay, this thesis establishes a theoretical bridge to fill that gap. This framework insists that to understand the global university, we must examine the relations making the global in local sites, which is exactly what the literature was missing. It thus justifies the ensuing methodological choices (post-qualitative, spatially-attuned methods) and foreshadows the analytical chapters. The findings chapters are explicitly organised around these concepts (indeed, the data analysis is structured to explore relational space in universities and the narratives of the global that emerge there). In the discussion chapter, the framework helps to interpret what the empirical insights mean for reimagining globalisation in HE

more broadly – demonstrating how a relational, embodied account can alter policy and theory perspectives.

In conclusion, the conceptual framework of the “global imaginary” and “space-place” offers a robust and innovative way to reconceptualise globalisation in English higher education. It keeps theory and practice closely intertwined - where the global imaginary provides a nuanced understanding of cultural meanings and ideologies, while Massey’s spatial theory ensures we account for context, materiality, and relation. Together they enable new ways of understanding and doing research in HE by moving beyond static, representational approaches. This enriches the analysis with theoretical depth while remaining grounded and accessible, since it connects abstract ideas to concrete university life. Ultimately, this conceptual framework not only underpins the research design but also carries methodological import: it enacts a worldview where ideas and places matter equally, thus reimagining the “global university” as something we can empirically trace in hallways and classrooms, even as we theorise about imaginaries and networks. It is in this synergy of global imaginary and space-place that the global university is continuously (re)made, and through which this study seeks to produce new insights into globalisation in higher education.

4 Methodology Chapter

Introduction

The methodological framework of this thesis is designed to rationalise the concept of the global university by exploring how it materialises through spatial practices within higher education institutions (HEIs). Positioned within the philosophical and theoretical foundations of new materialism and post-qualitative inquiry, this chapter outlines the experimental and innovative approach undertaken to interrogate the relational and emergent processes shaping the global imaginary of universities. Moving beyond traditional paradigms, the methodology aligns with the thesis's philosophical commitment to examining space and place as dynamic, productive forces in the making of the global, guided by the works of Karen Barad and Doreen Massey.

Idea of global university has emerged amongst the debates of global HE and shapes the common assumptions within the field. However, it is argued that research has only acknowledged characteristics and positioning of such university, whereas the meaning and the 'global' has still been left misunderstood. The existing assumptions underpinning the idea global university have been built upon assumptions created by wider social structures opposed to having a meaning of its own. Synthesis of global studies indicate that a more comprehensive understanding could be developed through an engaged theory of global university. Despite the widespread analysis of global transformation we lack work which attends to the micro processes informing us on the ways global processes play out and how global condition is created within universities. In response research has proposed to approach global university through

the making of global imaginaries and thus explore universities through a place-based perspective.

The doctoral research project poses two central research questions, with five sub-questions, to support the empirical investigation by incorporating the global sense of place developed by Massey – a key methodological concept in the work. These research questions first ground the global university in university locales, thus studying the global within the local. Secondly, they highlight and explore how the local and global are mutually constituted through the making of relations – through space. This grounding not only informs the methodological choices but also shapes the interpretation of data.

RQ1. How are global imaginaries produced in the localities of the universities?

RQ2. What constitutes university space and in particular, global university space?

RQ2a What is the relation between materiality, global imaginaries, and global practices and events?

RQ2b. What is the relation between the global spaces of the university and other spaces?

RQ2c. What are the distinct trajectories that coexist and create multiplicity?

RQ2d. What are the interrelations of and non-human interaction?

RQ2e. What are the processes which ensure that space is always being made?

The study takes place in England, within three English universities. First of all, this is where the topic was encountered and have been developed through personal lived experience. English higher education is a well understood context as well as the most accessible. Furthermore, there is particularly strong trend between English universities to identify as global universities. Hence English universities embody the imaginaries currently forming the conception of global university, namely internationalisation, global market and research.

The government policy papers themselves define global as status symbol and set out a strategy for building and strengthening their position in the global market of education export (Department for Education & Department for International Trade, 2021, p. 6). Literature has recognised that English universities which occupy high places in the global league tables have contributed the construction of 'global brand' of English universities (Lomer, Papatsiba, & Naidoo, 2018; Lynch, 2014).

With the focus on English universities it is hoped to directly challenge the existing assumptions and show these universities in a different light. By uncovering the spaces involved in the globalisation, made by the always making of relations, the flows and multiplicity as constitutive of global. More specific characteristics and background of English universities will discussed in the methods section which explains the sample of English universities that captures diversity of English HE.

Furthermore, the methodology attempts to provide a novel approach to globalisation in HEIs. One of the gaps identified has been that studies around global university rely on reductive frameworks, prioritising abstract metrics or representational strategies. These methodologies do not adequately account for the intricate dynamics of how

global imaginaries are operationalised through localised and embodied practices. This thesis responds to these limitations by employing a post-qualitative, new materialist lens that shifts the focus from static characteristics to relational processes, material-discursive entanglements, and the agency of space itself. In doing so, the methodology foregrounds Massey's (2005) concepts of *global sense of place* and "throwntogetherness", as well as Barad's (2006) principle of *intra-action*, to interrogate how the local and global co-constitute each other in the spatial practices of HEIs. This approach not only enriches our understanding of the interconnectedness between global and local, but also reveals how these interactions shape institutional identities and practices within higher education institutions.

The chapter begins with discussion of the philosophical and theoretical foundations, particularly new materialist and post-qualitative epistemologies. It then details the spatial inquiry framework, discussing how space and concepts of "global sense of place", "intra-action", and "throwntogetherness" are methodologically mobilised. Next, it explains the research assemblage, including the multi-site design, outlining the selection of English universities and participant recruitment strategies. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the data generation through online interviews and diffractive analysis techniques, giving an illustrative example of diffraction. Finally, the chapter reflects on ethical considerations and the researcher's positionality, acknowledging the entanglement of knowledge production with the researcher's situated presence.

4.1 Reflective discussion of Post-Qualitative and New Materialist Approach

In this research, the epistemological and ontological foundations are rooted in post-qualitative inquiry and new materialism, concepts that explained more fully in sections 4.4 to 4.5. This worldview provides that reality is produced through making of relations, which are essential for exploring the complex dynamics of global higher education. The journey toward adopting post-qualitative inquiry and new materialism as the methodological foundation for this research emerged as an organic response to the complexities inherent in studying the global university, coupled with the inability to find appropriate methodology from existing approaches. The initial research questions, grounded in the desire to understand how global imaginaries are made in space and place of HEIs, revealed significant conceptual and methodological gaps in traditional methods. Early exploration of the global university highlighted that much of the existing literature treated the global as a predefined category, largely abstracted from the material and relational processes that constitute it. This realisation prompted a critical re-evaluation of the theoretical and methodological tools required to address the nuances of the global, leading to the adoption of these two innovative approaches.

Following a critical analysis of research questions, assumptions about reality are summarised in the table below.

Assumption	Implication
Reality emerges through space and matter, social and natural	The research is concerned with how the topic of inquiry – global university - is made and constantly is being transfigured, instead of representing it
Global emerges through making of relations (space-place)	The nature of this natural-cultural entanglement needs to be studied, which representative techniques cannot achieve because neither reality nor culture is accepted as given. The phenomena studied emerges through interactions.
Operationalisation of concepts; reading them through one another to arrive at the research questions	This means working with and through concepts in the methodological stages of research; not relying on the framework but adapting an instrumental framework in which the researcher engages (Gamble et al., 2019; van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010)
Reality does not solely involve social actors, specifically humans. It is produced by humans and non-humans, through their interaction	Matter is not vacant, nor simply the background for human activity, but in fact is agential; research concerns the discourse-matter synergy (Fox & Alldred, 2018; Taylor & Ivinson, 2013)

Table 3 – Summary of philosophical assumptions

Thus, this research's philosophical stance has been shaped through a reflective process that considers the assumptions made during its development and the worldviews

presented in the paper (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Ulmer, 2017). This stance has emerged as a response to the concepts explored and the manner in which ideas have been approached from the initial stages.

In the development and application stages, I was prompted to consider the nature of my research and to select appropriate methodology. I explored a range of methodological approaches and critically analysed various established techniques for potential application. However, none fully aligned with my academic perspective and did not provide enough potential. This changed upon engaging with Carol Taylor's (2018) article "What can bodies do? En/gendering body-space choreographies of stillness, movement and flow in post-16 pedagogic encounters". The research took on Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of space as a socially constructed and actively practiced entity, one that remains dynamic, pluralistic, emergent, and continually evolving. This perspective, which emphasises the unfolding and indeterminate nature of space in the present moment, highlights its composition through multiple, intricate, and structured trajectories and practices. Operationalisation of Massey's space enabled exploration of classroom space through multiple roles it serves, such as entertainment and learning, affecting how students experience education. It emphasised the importance of objects and materials in shaping gender identities and interactions in the classroom. The article made me realise that I have not considered other philosophical strands beyond the comfort of qualitative research. It also unlocked the work of Karen Barad (2007), in particular materiality of classrooms and intra-actions of pedagogies.

Since then, I have become deeply immersed in "post" theories, postmodernism, posthumanism, and the influential scholars and references associated with them (Lather, 1992; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; Lumsden et al., 2019). This engagement has profoundly reshaped my understanding of qualitative methodologies, offering a fundamentally new perspective that I could not ignore in the context of my doctoral research. I was presented with the opportunity (as well as immense challenge) to assemble a unique inquiry centred around the very concepts that sparked the desire to pursue this research. This was not merely a methodological preference or desire for an innovative approach but an ethical and ontological commitment - one that ensured the epistemological flexibility required to operationalise Massey's concept of a *global sense of place*.

4.2 Ontology and Philosophical Commitments

At the core of this research lies an ontological commitment to relationality, emergence, and immanence – a view of reality as continuously in-the-making rather than composed of static entities. The philosophy of immanence is grounded in poststructuralist philosophy, drawing on thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, who emphasise the importance of immanence and the refusal of formalised methodologies (Lundy, 2009; Ringrose, 2011; Smith, 2001). It challenges the humanist ontology that centres the human subject as the primary source of knowledge, instead promoting a decentred view that includes non-human elements and materiality (Lather, 2017; Sinclair & Mahboub, 2024).

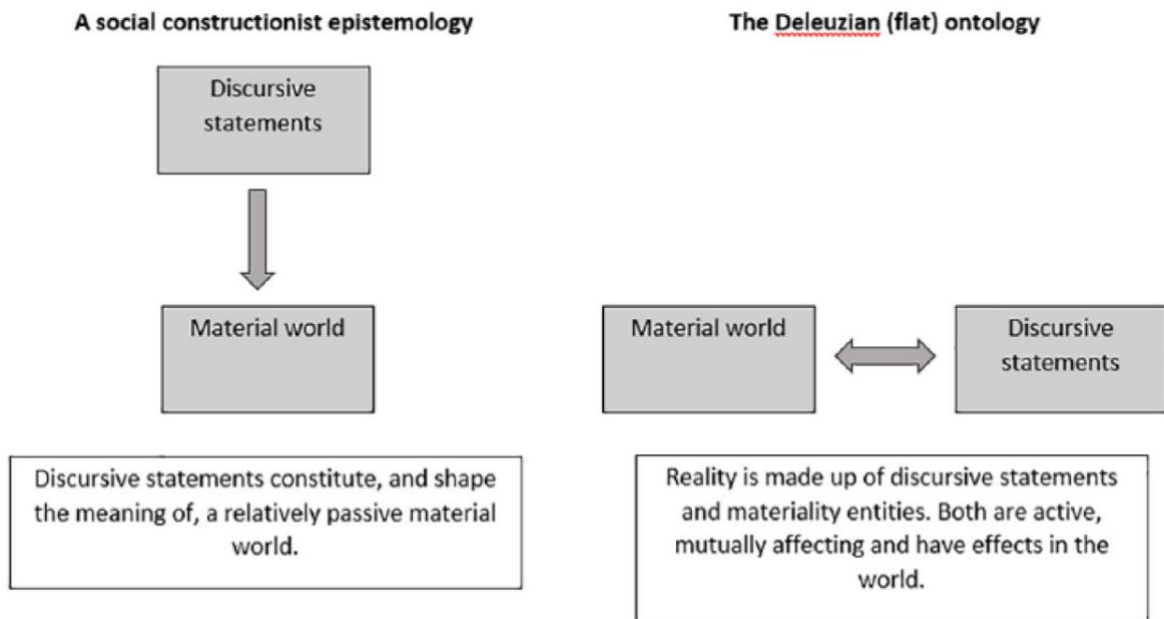


Figure 2 - The difference between a social constructionist epistemology and a Deleuzian ontology. (Feely, 2019, p. 6)

Such ontology can be approached through two interconnected paradigms: post-qualitative inquiry and new materialism. Embracing these perspectives is an organic response to the complexity of studying “the global university,” a concept that eludes easy definition and cannot be adequately captured by conventional methods. In contrast, a post-qualitative, new materialist ontology views the global not as a fixed object or scale, but as an ongoing process – something that is enacted through myriad relations across humans, places, and things. Such a worldview advocates that universities are sites through which globalisation is actively made and experienced.

By grounding the inquiry in post-humanist and post-structuralist thought, this study shifts the focus from humans as the only source of meaning and instead acknowledges that knowledge is created within the interconnectedness of people, material artefacts,

discourses, and places (Taylor, 2020). This is a significant ontological shift, opposed to assuming independent subjects and objects that interact, reality is conceived as relational flux, in other words, becoming rather than being. Such an ontology is well-suited to exploring global higher education, where phenomena (like “global university” identities or policies) emerge through complex configurations of local and global relations, not from linear cause-effect chains. Embracing these philosophical foundations enables a methodology that avoids reductive tendencies and instead embraces the fluid, relational dynamics of spatial practices in universities (Wong, 2024). In sum, the study’s ontological stance is deliberately non-dualistic and process-oriented, providing the flexibility needed to investigate how global imaginaries are made and re-made in the everyday of university.

4.3 Post-Qualitative Inquiry

Post-Qualitative Inquiry (PQI) offers a philosophical mode of research that departs from fixed methodological templates and human-centred assumptions. Rooted in post-structuralism and post-humanism, PQI emphasises that knowledge is emergent and relational rather than merely discovered. In practice, this means privileging concepts like immanence (all phenomena exist only through their ongoing interactions) and becoming (focus on processes and change) over static “being”. Thus, PQI challenges the idea that researchers can step back and objectively represent reality. Instead, it treats inquiry as always entangled with theory, context, and the researcher’s own involvement. St. Pierre (2019) describes post-qualitative research as grounded in

intensive and repeated readings of theory that generate inquiry. In other words, theory is an active companion in the research process in contrast to informing it, shaping how questions are asked and meaning is made. As Keucker (2021) puts it, post-qualitative work remains a “philosophical mode of inquiry” (p.554) engaged in continual conceptual experimentation rather than following a cookbook of methods.

Adopting a PQI orientation in this study is not a rejection of qualitative inquiry’s rich tradition, but rather a means to avoid *premature closure* on what counts as valid knowledge. PQI encourages the researcher to remain open and responsive to unexpected insights. For example, rather than beginning with a strict definition of a “global university” or a predetermined set of codes, it allows to ask how globality is enacted: How do everyday practices, from international partnerships and digital classrooms to visa policies and campus architectures, intra-act to produce a sense of “global” in each local university setting? By tracing these processes, the inquiry can reveal the often overlooked dynamics through which “global” actually takes shape. This approach aligns with recent trends in education research where scholars attend to affective, material, and discursive forces shaping experience. For instance, Koro-Ljungberg et al. (2018) and MacLure (2013) explore data beyond just interview transcripts, looking at embodied affects, silences, and material encounters in educational settings. Such studies exemplify PQI’s capacity to handle the messy, dynamic aspects of social phenomena that linear methodologies might ignore. Importantly, PQI also focuses on what emerges. It resists defining outcomes in advance or forcing data into predefined themes. Analysis happens through iterative engagement, for example, writing and re-writing as a form of thinking that stays

attentive to nuance and surprise. St. Pierre and colleagues argue that even notions like “data” and “methodology” become problematic in PQI (St. Pierre, 2019; St. Pierre et al., 2016). Traditional checkpoints of validity or saturation are reconsidered; the researcher continually needs to ask: What is happening here? How else might I read this? This openness does carry a risk, if “anything goes,” research can lose clarity. Critics have noted the danger of post-qualitative work becoming too abstract or untethered from real-world problems. To address this, the present study maintains a clear focus on its phenomenon (the making of global universities) and uses concrete guiding concepts (Massey’s and Barad’s, introduced below) to anchor the inquiry. In other words, while innovative and fluid, the approach is not without structure, it is strategically guided by theoretical concepts-as-methods (Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017) to ensure meaningful analysis rather than free-form abstraction.

Ultimately, PQI redefines the role of the researcher. Instead of being a neutral observer who collects data from a distance, the researcher is seen as part of the world being studied. Own position, the questions asked, and even presence in sites (or virtual presence in online interviews) are all entangled in the production of knowledge. This reflexive stance aligns with feminist and postmodern critiques of science, but PQI pushes further to situate the researcher among the many human and non-human actors that co-produce the research “findings.” By acknowledging this, PQI research often treats writing itself as part of the analytic process (rather than a transparent reporting medium), an idea Richardson (2003, p. 959) called “writing as a method of inquiry”. In summary, post-qualitative inquiry provides a flexible, philosophically rich framework that allows this study to re-imagine the global university not as a static

object to be measured, but as an unfolding configuration of relations that we trace and engage with throughout the research.

4.4 New Materialism

Running in tandem with the post-qualitative orientation is the influence of new materialism, which brings a crucial focus on materiality and more-than-human agencies. New materialism is a broad label for approaches that rethink the role of matter in social life, insisting that the physical and the symbolic are deeply intertwined (what Barad calls “material-discursive”). In contrast to social constructionist views that might treat material context as a passive, new materialism asserts that objects, spaces, bodies, and other non-human elements have agentic effects. Thus, they participate in events and outcomes. As Forman (2020) notes, new materialism involves a “flattened” ontology in which human and non-human actors are seen on the same plane of existence, each capable of affecting the other. This does not mean humans and rocks are the same, but that analytical hierarchies privileging human intention above all else are replaced by an understanding that power and agency are distributed across networks of relationships, including those that are material, spatial, or technological. In practical terms, a new materialist lens in educational research urges the observer to notice things like architecture, infrastructure, natural elements, or digital platforms as integral to the educational experience, not merely context. For example, a university’s internationalisation is not driven only by human decisions, it might be facilitated and shaped by things like campus buildings (international student centres, open spaces for

multicultural events), technologies (learning management systems enabling global classrooms), or even the geographical location and built environment. Such elements are not inert because they prompt and constrain certain actions. New materialism thus complements PQI by ensuring that the inquiry pays attention to the agency of space, place, and objects in shaping social phenomena. It aligns with posthumanist thinking that decenters the human, but specifically zooms in on matter's vitality and the embodied, spatial aspects of how reality unfolds (Braidotti, 2016, 2019). In the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), whose philosophy underlies much of new materialism, life is composed of assemblages and flows rather than essences. It is a view that replaces rigid structures with evolving configurations of relationships and "affective moments" that generate change.

For this study, new materialism provides the rationale to treat space as an active force. Higher education research has traditionally looked at policies, curricula, student/faculty experiences, often bracketing off the physical campus or global geography as background. Here, inspired by Doreen Massey and others, space itself is theorised as productive. The layout of a campus, the location of a university in a city, the transnational networks of finance and ideas it's embedded in – all these are constitutive of what the "global university" means in practice. New materialist scholars Fox and Alldred (2017, p. 155) articulate this well by describing research itself as an assemblage of "bodies, things, settings or social formations, or of assemblages of these," rather than a process controlled exclusively by human researchers. They suggest that when we study a social event, our research apparatus (questions, methods, setting) entangles with the event, creating a hybrid "research-assemblage" that

produces knowledge. This perspective has two implications: (1) Ontologically, universities can be seen as assemblages of humans and non-humans (policies, buildings, ranking systems, etc.) coming together; (2) Methodologically, the approach to studying those universities must also be assemblage-like, therefore, flexible, attuned to unexpected agents, and open to the micropolitics of how knowledge is produced in each case.

Educational researchers have begun to apply new materialist ideas in varied ways, showing their value. For example, thinking with new materialism in qualitative case studies has illuminated how phenomena like classroom dynamics or institutional change emerge from interactions between people and material settings. Andersson, Korp, & Reinertsen (2020) demonstrate that by acknowledging non-human actors (from classroom furniture to policy documents), researchers can better explain how certain outcomes or behaviours. In higher education, scholars such as Carol Taylor (2016, 2017) have used new materialist and posthumanist approaches to reconceptualise knowledge and pedagogy, paying attention to how bodies, spaces, and objects intra-act in learning environments. These studies differ from conventional work by not just interviewing people about their experiences, but by observing and theorising the role of material artifacts (e.g. laboratory equipment, seating arrangements, Wi-Fi connectivity) in shaping those experiences. By integrating such insights, the methodology acknowledges that the “global” in a university is not just an idea or a policy, it is something materially enacted through buildings, through interactive maps on university websites, through the presence of diverse bodies and artifacts in campus spaces. This new materialist sensibility thus is well suited to

capture the full texture of globalisation in action within HEIs, avoiding purely discourse-based or purely quantitative metrics that would miss these rich interactions.

4.5 Theorising as Doing: Concepts as Methodological Forces

This study weaves together post-qualitative inquiry and new materialist thinking into a coherent methodological orientation grounded in relational ontology. While distinct in emphasis - post-qualitative inquiry foregrounding epistemological and ethical openness, and new materialism emphasising material-discursive entanglements - these traditions are brought into productive intra-action. Each addresses the limitations of the other, where PQI resists methodological prescription, new materialism anchors inquiry in the vitality of matter and spatial-temporal complexity. Together, they enable a methodological sensibility attuned to the dynamism of global higher education as a spatial and affective formation.

Central to this orientation is the premise that concepts do not merely describe phenomena - they enact them. Rather than serving as tools for interpretation after the fact, concepts are treated as operative forces that shape the inquiry itself. This approach draws from the notion of concept-as-method (Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017), which resists the logic of application and instead calls for working with concepts as generative companions in thought and practice. Concepts such as intra-action (Barad), global sense of place, and throwntogetherness (Massey) are not simply theoretical lenses but methodological actors that configure the conditions of possibility for the research.

In particular, Karen Barad's notion of intra-action serves as a methodological hinge in this project. In contrast to interaction, which presumes pre-existing, bounded entities, intra-action emphasises that entities, subjects, and spaces emerge through their relations.

Whereas traditional interaction assumes separate entities that come together (presupposing an individualist ontology), intra-action holds that entities do not pre-exist their relating. Rather, "distinct agencies do not precede their interaction, but rather emerge through their intra-action" (Barad, 2007, p. 33). In other words, beings, objects, and ideas materialise only through entangled relations, not as isolated individuals. Haraway (1992) first coined "intra-action" to signal this mutual constitution of entangled agencies.

inter	=	among or in the midst of
intra	=	(from) within

Figure 3 - Difference between interaction and intra-action

Crucially, this shift from interaction to intra-action dismantles the notion of autonomous subjects or objects: any university, student, or researcher is not a self-contained unit with inherent attributes that then interact; instead, they become in and through the entanglements (social, material, discursive) that they are part of. "This way of seeing the world is different from Cartesian dualism, which dichotomises or makes binaries, cutting into two" (Murriss & Bozalek, 2021, p. 71). The authors succinctly notes that intra-action "does not presuppose individualised existence before

relations,” unlike interaction which assumes “entities exist individually before they interact” (p.70). This relational ontology aligns with new materialism’s premise that matter and meaning are inextricably intertwined. Barad emphasises that what we usually call “object” and “subject” only take form via specific intra-actions, an idea that reframes the research context as a web of interdependencies rather than a field of separate elements.

This has profound methodological consequences. Research is no longer conceived as observing an external world but as a situated entanglement in which researcher, material, and context co-constitute the phenomena under study. This reorientation shifts the role of methods from procedural tools to relational engagement practices. Rather than following a predefined data collection and analysis sequence, this inquiry enacts its methodology through attunement to spatial-material assemblages, responding to the affordances and intensities that emerge in the research process. Concepts such as intra-action are not used to analyse space after the fact, but to compose it differently, to open it up to new ways of sensing and making meaning.

Researcher’s Role in Knowledge Production

Embracing intra-action carries profound implications for how researchers position themselves and produce knowledge. If it is accepted that researchers are always already part of the phenomena we study, the ideal of a detached, objective observer fades. Instead, the researcher is an entangled participant, inseparable from the apparatus of inquiry. Feminist scholars like Haraway and Barad argue that objectivity

is reconfigured when we acknowledge our entanglement. Haraway’s notion of situated knowledges and Barad’s agential realism both insist that knowers are part of the world’s differential becoming (Barad, 2014; Haraway, 1988). Barad provides that intra-action involves rethinking and redoing our claims to knowledge (epistemology), as well as our assumptions about what the world is made of (ontology) and how we relate ethically. This means knowledge is not discovered about pre-existing objects, but generated through specific intra-actions within a research assemblage.

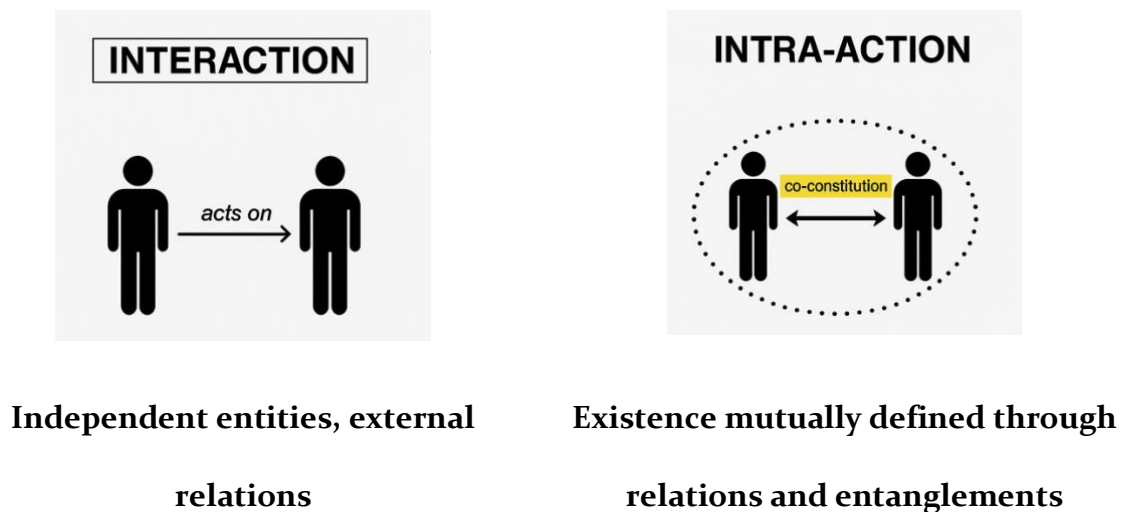


Figure 4 - Existence between interaction and intra-action. *Note.* Adapted from Hespanhol (2023)

Maggie MacLure takes up this and explain how data and researcher intra-act to produce meaning. MacLure (2013) evocatively describes data “making itself intelligible” to the researcher – for instance, certain moments glow or draw the researcher’s attention without a preset coding schema. Such insights emerge not from a researcher imposing categories from outside, but from being attentive within the entangled flow

of data generation. This stance also resonates with posthumanist view that thinking and knowing are not exclusive human privileges but occur in webs of human and non-human relations (Braidotti, 2019). In short, intra-action decenters the individual (whether researcher or participant) as the sole source of agency or knowledge. Even the concepts and theories that are used are part of this apparatus. Barad in dialogue with Judith Butler's (1990) idea of performativity suggests that reality is enacted (performed) through iterative intra-actions rather than merely observed (Barad, 2003). The researcher's responsibility, then, is to remain reflexive and accountable for how our intra-actions help constitute the very phenomena we investigate.

4.6 Intra-Action in Practice: From Design to Analysis

In this research, intra-action serves as a method-in-action across the research process also providing how *global sense of place* is operationalised. First, in research design, intra-action encourages us to treat theoretical concepts as methodological tools. Rather than framing a study around fixed independent "variables" or predefined case boundaries, a researcher might start by mapping a research assemblage – the human and nonhuman elements, sites, and histories that entangle to produce the phenomenon of interest. This research speaks of sites rather than bounded "cases", acknowledging that each site is porous and constituted by external relations. For example, designing a study on global universities intra-actively recognises that the "site" of a university extends beyond its campus - international branch campuses,

digital platforms, policy documents, traveling students and faculty are all part of the university assemblage.

Hence, the research questions and methods are formulated to follow these relations and exchanges, rather than to isolate a single location or unit. This approach is transversal and multi-sited, echoing Braidotti's (2019) call for transversality and heterogeneity as guiding principles for posthuman knowledge. It also means using terminology like data generation instead of data collection. This signals that data are co-produced in the field through the meeting of researcher, participants, and material environments, not passively collected from an external source. As reality is enacted through the entanglement there is no field to go and collect the 'data'. Hence in this doctoral research field, the fieldwork is being performed throughout the thesis development.

To highlight the power of intra-action as method in the study of "global university" it might be useful to compare it to a social constructivist worldview. Traditional qualitative design might treat each university as a case with defined boundaries (campus, programs, personnel) that interacts with global forces (e.g. internationalisation policies, student mobility flows). In contrast, an intra-active approach reframes a global university as a phenomenon produced through constant entangling with people, places, and practices.

Case study is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary defined system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. In the new materialism terrain, cases are not objects of inquiry, but movement enacting forces

(Andersson et al., 2020; Cantwell & Taylor, 2013). Respectively, a material case study flips the design of traditional case study design inside-out by mapping affective flows, relations and territorializations in assemblages (Hordvik et al., 2019).

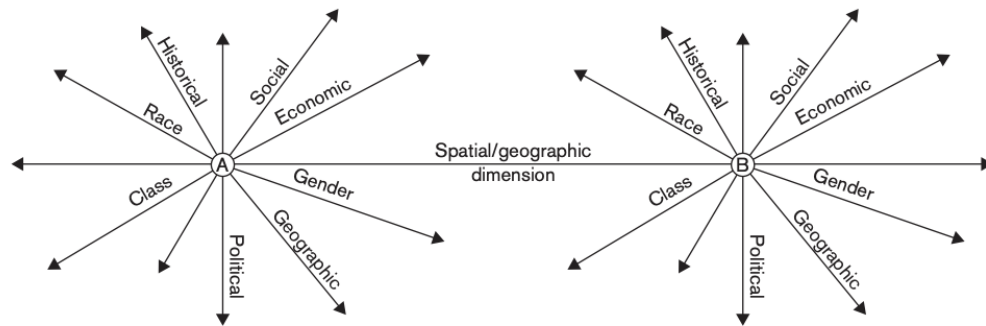


Figure 5 - "Multidimensional Global Site Comparison" (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017, p. 190)

For instance, a policy document co-authored by international stakeholders, a Zoom classroom with students across continents, and a local campus tradition, all intra-act to constitute what “University X” is at any moment. Spatially, the global university is not a single location with an “impact” on other locations, but an assemblage of sites cut together-apart in Barad’s terms (all in their way distinct yet inseparable). This perspective troubles simple inside/outside or local/global binaries (Murriss et al., 2022). The boundary of the institution is treated as permeable and continuously reconfigured; global forces do not act on a self-contained university, but intra-act within it, such that the “global” and the “university” mutually constitute each other. Knowledge production in this context likewise cannot be pinned to one locale, for instance, a classroom, it is distributed across networks of collaboration, digital infrastructures, and cultural exchanges. Adopting intra-action as a guiding concept in this study

provides pivotal strength to move from studying “the influence of global factors on University X” to studying how University X comes to be (and to matter) through its entangled relations. This might involve, for example, tracing how a scientific discovery is not solely the achievement of one research office (interaction of individual scientists), but a phenomenon emerging from intra-actions among funding bodies, global data-sharing platforms, local experimental materials, and institutional ethos. By diffractively reading the data, for example, comparing interview narratives of faculty in London and Birmingham campuses through each other, and through theoretical concepts of space and identity, the research is able to reveal the entangled nature of the “global university” beyond any single narrative or site. Such an approach is both philosophically rigorous and practically rich, because it yields insights into how power, material conditions, and discourse co-produce what we observe, thereby offering a more complex, dynamic understanding of educational phenomena in a globalised era. Operationalising intra-action as a core methodological principle reshaped each stage of the research process, from data generation and analysis to researcher-participant relations, by foregrounding entanglements over discrete entities. In summary, the table below provides an overview by contrasting this inquiry with what a conventional qualitative inquiry would typically entail.

Aspect	Conventional Qualitative Multi-Case Study Approach	Post-Qualitative / New Materialist Approach
Ontology	Assumes a stable, knowable reality. The university is a bounded institution embedded in socio-political structures. Space/place is physical and symbolic, to be interpreted.	Ontology is relational, processual, and non-representational. The global university is not a stable object but a becoming, an entanglement of human and more-than-human forces, spatialities, and temporalities.
Epistemology	Knowledge is constructed through interpretivist frameworks. Seeks to understand how actors make meaning of space/place. Case studies provide context-specific insights.	Knowledge emerges through entangled material-discursive practices. Knowing is doing — not representation but intervention. Data is not collected but produced through intra-actions.
Aims	To understand how globalisation manifests in UK university spaces and how space/place shape institutional responses. To compare and interpret meanings across cases.	To trace how the global university materialises through affective intensities, architectural atmospheres, digital interfaces, and spatial flows. To follow emergences rather than compare cases.
Design/ Methodology	Multi-case study of selected UK universities. Data from interviews, observations, documents. Coding and thematic analysis used to identify patterns.	Methodology is emergent, non-linear, and experimental. The research assemblage includes researcher, architecture, bodies, policies, technologies, weather, emotion. Data is approached as “matter” rather than representation.
Role of Researcher	Researcher as observer-interpreter. Reflexivity focuses on positionality, bias, and ethics.	Researcher is part of the assemblage. Reflexivity becomes diffraction. Not looking back on but tracing entanglements. Researcher affects and is affected by the field (reality).
Space/Place	Space/place are containers or symbols shaped by global forces. For example, international student lounges, global branding, and architectural redesigns might be analysed for their meanings.	Space/place are events or affects — atmospheres, intensities, flows. The “international student lounge” is the relations that make it up. Hence analysed through its smell, acoustics, and emotional charge, not just its symbolic function.

Findings	Findings may include multiple themes, “global imaginaries in campus design,” “spatial strategies of internationalisation,” “negotiating global/local tensions.”	Findings are not fixed but emergent like tracing the affective force of coffee shop; the entanglement of tech, movement, and anxiety of admin work; or commute or absence of it (virtual university) – it’s about multiplicity and ongoing making of these
Contribution	Adds contextual, empirical understanding to policy debates. Offers recommendations for design or planning sensitive to global/local dynamics.	Intervenes in what it means to study the university. Shifts focus from representation to becoming, from meaning to mattering. Opens speculative possibilities for what else the university can do or be.

Table 4 - Qualitative vs Post-Qualitative Inquiry

Throughout, this methodological approach prioritises relational enactment over representational truth. Empirical moments, whether a campus map, a Zoom exchange, or a strategic policy document, are not treated as static objects of analysis but as material-discursive phenomena through which space, subjectivity, and power are co-constituted. These elements become apparatuses to think-with, rather than data to mine. Concepts such as intra-action, global sense of place, and throwntogetherness function not as explanatory tools but as generative forces, shaping what becomes thinkable, askable, and knowable within the inquiry.

In sum, this shift, from cases to sites, from data collection to material generation, from thematic coding to tracing entanglements, ensures that research practices are ontologically congruent with the phenomena they engage. This project does not describe the global university in a conventional sense, nor does it aim to define it,

rather, it enacts the university's globality through the very methods it mobilises.

Methodology here is not a neutral vessel but a performative terrain where the research object is continually emergent.

These commitments contribute to a broader methodological reorientation within the social sciences in light of globalisation, climate crisis, technological mediation, and inequality. These phenomena resist linear causality and human-centered explanations as they demand methodological forms that can trace distributed agency, non-linear effects, and multi-scalar entanglements. In education research especially questions of diversity, inclusion, and justice are deeply embedded in material and global flows.

Such approaches open up new possibilities. They invite not only the question "What is happening?" but also "How is it happening through these entanglements, and how else could it happen?" and thus "What alternatives are possible?"

With these commitments in place, the section that follows outlines the research assemblage - a conceptual and practical elaboration of how the inquiry was enacted. This includes the diverse materials, sites, temporalities, and relations through which the research unfolded, as well as the methodological sensibilities that enabled their intra-active composition.

4.7 Research Assemblage

In alignment with post-qualitative inquiry and new materialist thought, this research does not adopt a traditional research design but rather a research assemblage - a

dynamic, entangled process of knowledge production that resists rigid methodological structures (Fox & Alldred, 2015; St. Pierre, 2019). The term "assemblage" serves a dual purpose. It reflects philosophical origins while also highlighting the underlying logic of the inquiry. The research assemblage is a product of various tools and practices that I, as a researcher, have assembled to investigate the concept of a global university. This approach allows for a flexible and responsive exploration of the complexities involved in understanding how global universities are brought into being through their interconnectedness of various actors, contexts and position.

As an assemblage, research is not treated as a structured procedure or system but as a performed material-discursive event, where concepts, tools, spaces, and relations interact (Barad, 2007). For instance, traditional research methods, such as interviews or observations, can be reconfigured as part of the assemblage, allowing for new insights and alternative ways of knowing to emerge (Taylor, 2017). Fox and Alldred (2015, p. 194) describe the research assemblage as consisting of

- The affective relations within the research process, including the events, bodies, environments, and social formations that shape the study.
- Research tools such as interview schedules, recording technologies, analytical frameworks, and software.
- Existing research literature and prior studies that inform and interact with the study.
- The 'data' generated through these methodologies, not as fixed entities but as evolving and entangled with the research process itself.

- The researcher as an integral part of the assemblage, operating within and shaping the research through their engagement.

Beyond these elements, research assemblages are also influenced by broader contextual factors, such as the physical and institutional spaces in which research takes place, as well as the philosophical, cultural, ethical, and disciplinary frameworks that underpin academic inquiry.

Following Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) notion of assemblages as productive "machines," research can be understood as a series of interconnected machines that generate knowledge through processes such as 'data collection' and 'data analysis' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; St. Pierre et al., 2016). However, rather than treating these as predefined stages, post-qualitative research views them as fluid activities that shape and are shaped by the research-assemblage itself. I find the use of the term machines appropriate in conceptualising the various elements that need to be assembled. Each of the tools that constitute the research process, have a purpose and will produce partial knowledge. For example, an interview "machine" will have distinct affective consequences on the data it produces, compared to an observation "machine".

To decide on the research machines for my assemblage, I began by formulating the outputs that they could produce. This allowed me to identify relevant tools and techniques, while ensuring that the research design remained open to emergent opportunities and alternative ways of knowing, and in particular to:

1. Include diverse universities reflecting current discourse. I wanted to explore a university which was thought to be global as well as universities that would not fit that title.
2. Be focused on a particular field or area of study within each of the universities. This allowed me to gain a more nuanced understanding of disciplinary context as well as offering practical feasibility.
3. Engage with individuals at various levels and positions within universities, thereby gaining insights from a range of perspectives and academic journeys.

These considerations led me to assemble various elements, including selecting sites from English higher education institutions and identifying the faculties and schools in which to immerse myself. Additionally, I focused on how to engage with participants and what questions to ask them, as well as how to interact with the data collected. The next section provides more details on the specific components of my research, including site and participant selection, the interview process, and how I worked with the transcripts and their roles within the research framework.

Multi-Site Inquiry

In the new materialism terrain, cases are not objects of inquiry, but movement enacting forces (Andersson et al., 2020; Taylor, 2013). Respectively, a material case study flips the design of traditional case study design inside-out by mapping affective flows, relations and territorialisations in assemblages (Hordvik et al., 2019).

In this research, I adopt a multi-site approach rather than a traditional multi-case study design to align with the ontological and epistemological commitments of post-qualitative and new materialist inquiry. While a multi-case study typically seeks to compare and contrast distinct, bounded cases, treating them as discrete entities for analysis (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2014), a multi-site approach attends to the relationships and movements between selected sites and elements of the research apparatus, enacting the university (Daw Srdanovic et al., 2024).

To explore how global and local forces materialise within universities, a multi-site approach traces how spatial imaginaries and practices emerge across different institutional environments (Marcus, 1995). Therefore, the sites were not selected as “cases” but rather as specific configurations within a broader field of global higher education. The institutions involved in this research were identified based on their differential positioning in discourses of global higher education, including:

- A research-intensive university that actively positions itself and is recognised as a “global university” through rankings, research networks, and strategic internationalisation policies.
- A vocationally oriented university with a distinct institutional mission, focusing on local engagement and applied education.

This selection does not aim to create a comparison but rather to trace how globality is enacted in varied institutional configurations. Universities are not viewed as pre-existing categories but as relational spaces, continuously reshaped by policies, material conditions, and human and non-human interactions (Massey, 2005; Taylor & Fairchild, 2020).

Although the research explored contrasting sites, the study was focused on the focal point – that being the spatial/geographic/material dimension of the university through which global within local could be studied.

“A focal point allows the researcher to corral complexities into one tangible place, thing, or process. A focal point can localise, concretise, humanise, and personalise global research in analytically productive ways that make studying complex global scale processes much more feasible for most researchers.”

(Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017, p. 190)

Rather than seeking broad generalisation, the material global site study focuses on particular spatial and material dimensions of the university and examines how these are connected to wider global processes (Andersson et al., 2020). It enables the exploration of the university time-space-place-matter in relation to places beyond to give it a global sense. Significantly this perspective successfully engineers a methodology that locates global within national as suggested by Sassen (2019). Based on this premise the research was designed to study universities within UK.

Additionally, instead of purposively selecting human participants, the research purposively selected university spaces that made up the spatial dimension (focal point) in which data was generated through interviews.

This study employed its multi-site design to investigate English universities as loci of global and local interplay. The rationale behind this approach is rooted in the complexity of spatial dynamics within HEIs and the need for a nuanced, relational understanding of how global and local processes materialise within institutional contexts. As stated, as spatial entities, universities are not merely sites where education

takes place; they are actively involved in the production of knowledge, identity, and power through their spatial configurations, discursive practices, and institutional imaginaries (Massey, 2005; Taylor & Lahad, 2018). By examining multiple sites, this research documents the diverse ways in which universities enact global, moving beyond singular or homogenous representations of the "global university."

Sites

As stated, site selection was guided by the aim of examining universities that occupy different positions within the higher education landscape relevant to the research questions, rather than by constructing a fixed typology. The study therefore included three institutions selected for their contrasting orientations and public self-positioning. These comprised: a university that explicitly presents itself as a global institution and is research-intensive with strong performance in international league tables; a teaching-focused university with a significant emphasis on professional education; and a newer, more vocationally oriented institution. Together, these sites enable comparative insight into how globality is articulated and enacted across varied institutional contexts without assuming discrete or mutually exclusive categories.

Site selection unfolded in a way that foregrounded maximum variation (Patton, 1999). Because the goal of the research was to gain rich understanding of complex spatial dynamics, it needed to select fertile exemplars of the experience for study. These selections were purposeful. They sought to "identify and select the information-rich sites for the most proper utilisation of available resources" (Etikan, 2016, p. 2). The

concern was not how much data was gathered or from how many sources but whether the data that were collected were sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding global phenomena. Creswell (2012) also suggests purposeful maximal sampling as preferable because it allows the research to show different perspectives on the problem, process, or event under examination.

This translates into being able to understand the creation of global university through various institutional settings. Imperative to this maximum-variance strategy is to select sites:

- that have the same or comparable circumstances, but that differ in the presence or absence of the phenomenon they want to study
- that give a maximum amount of information about the research objective at stake
- that help to identify the specific conditions and characteristics of a phenomenon that has been characterized in only general terms (Mills, 2010, p. 3)

The status differentiation of UK universities is undeniably complex and multifaceted. Institutions occupying similar status positions often share distinctive operational styles. Existing literature identifies five key dimensions that shape university status: research activity, teaching quality, economic resources, academic selectivity, and the socioeconomic composition of the student body (Boliver, 2015). In seeking to challenge dominant assumptions about what constitutes a 'global' university, it was essential to include both institutions formally recognised as global within the current higher education system and those that are typically excluded from such categorisation. The

literature review underscores how global universities are commonly associated with prestige, world-class standing, and research intensity—characteristics central to the Global Research University model. To incorporate a geographical dimension into the selection strategy, maximum variation in the spatial location of universities was also deliberately pursued.

To select three distinctive sites within English higher education, the clusters developed by Viki Boliver (2015) were used. These clusters are relevant to English universities and capture distinctive groups and landscape of English HE. Her cluster analysis is based on research activity, teaching quality, economic resources, academic selectivity, and socioeconomic student mix (the full list of criteria and results of cluster analysis can be found in Appendix A). These clusters provided contrasting sites yet are an alternative way to selecting universities based on specific performance in global league tables.

Overall, Boliver's cluster analysis provides 125 universities divided into three clusters. The multi-site study was assembled by choosing one university from each of the clusters and thus producing three contrasting institutions of varied status and level of activity. Further, as noted, a geographical criterion was also used (Office for National Statistics, 2011). The aim of this input was to tailor the sites towards the focal point of multi-site study. I have summarised my sites in the table below, which includes the status and location of each of the sites-universities.

Cluster	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Status	High	Medium	Lower
Description	Highly ranked and what would be referred to as global research universities or world class.	Medium or average UK universities in terms of research and teaching.	The lowest research activity compared to the other clusters.
Composition	Includes 22 Russell Group universities and 17 other older universities.	The largest cluster with a mix of resources. Includes all but one of the University Alliance member institutions.	Significantly different in size and resources. Includes 13 other old universities and 54 of 19 new universities (Million+, GuildHE, and unaffiliated post-1992 institutions).
Geographical City/area	Metropolitan	Urban with conurbation	Urban with city/town or significant rural
City/area Description	Universities are located and laid out within the metropolitan city of London. These are multiple campus universities embedded in the city.	Universities are part of major cities, with a mix of single or multiple campuses, often with a recognisable main campus.	Smaller universities located in smaller cities or less central locations. Most are single-campus institutions.

Table 5 - Overview of Research Sites

The resulting matrix produced three universities/sites for in-depth exploration:

1. **University College London (UCL)** – Representing the high-status cluster, UCL is one of the UK’s most prestigious and internationally recognised institutions. It is deeply embedded in global research networks and consistently ranked among the world’s top universities. With its high research intensity, elite student demographic, and cosmopolitan institutional identity, UCL epitomises the ‘global university’ both in self-representation and in international

reputation. Suitably, UCL brands itself as “London’s Global University” and thus it serves as a paradigmatic site for examining how global status is constructed and maintained within elite higher education.

2. **Birmingham City University (BCU)** – Situated within the middle-status cluster, BCU is a well-established institution known for its strong teaching profile and more regionally rooted identity. It caters to a socioeconomically diverse student population and engages with its urban locale in a manner that reflects a more nationally oriented mission. While it does participate in global education dynamics, its position in the hierarchy of global higher education is more peripheral. BCU provides a critical vantage point for examining how ‘global’ imperatives are negotiated in institutions outside the elite.

3. **Anglia Ruskin University (ARU)** – As a representative of the lower-status cluster, ARU reflects the mission of newer universities with a strong emphasis on widening participation, vocational education, and local engagement. With limited research capacity and lower international visibility, ARU is often positioned at the margins of global university rankings. Nonetheless, it presents a valuable site for interrogating how global discourses permeate institutions traditionally seen as outside the ‘global university’ paradigm.

By incorporating these three distinctive universities, the study hopes to provide a holistic understanding of the complex phenomenon of the ‘global university’ and how

this plays out across different institutional contexts within the UK higher education landscape (Datta et al., 2019).

Participants

The participant recruitment process was also guided by a similar process, which aimed to capture multiple and diverse perspectives from individuals occupying different positions and roles within the university. This approach allowed for an exploration of the ways in which various university spaces function as sites of engagement with global and local dimensions. To operationalise this, I developed an initial list of potential university spaces and participant categories from which individuals could be recruited.

While ensuring practicality, I first examined the organisational structures of the selected universities through their publicly available staff directories and faculty websites. This process allowed for the identification of key schools, departments, and individuals working within them. Given the desire for consistency across cases, I determined that faculties within the social sciences were the most suitable sites for participant recruitment. All of the sites had a well-established social sciences division with a similar organisational structure, containing multiple disciplines and research orientations.

As part of site selection and immersion in university spaces, interviews were conducted with participants from three schools of social sciences within each university. This decision was both methodological and practical. By focusing on a specific unit within the social sciences faculty, I was able to develop a deeper engagement with

institutional space, facilitate access negotiations, and establish meaningful interactions with participants. Furthermore, limiting recruitment to a single faculty within each university streamlined access requests and ensured that the participant pool remained manageable while still providing a diverse range of insights.

I narrowed my sites to the particular university faculties and schools listed in the table below:

Cluster	University	Faculty	School
1	University College London	Social & Historical Sciences	Geography
			Anthropology
			Political Science
2	Birmingham City University	Business, Law and Social Sciences	Business School
			School of Law
			School of Social Sciences
3	Anglia Ruskin University	Faculty of Arts, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences	Humanities and Social Sciences
			School of Management
			School of Education

Table 6 – Research Sites and Corresponding Schools

Following an initial mapping of faculty structures, I identified three schools within the social sciences faculty at each university as potential recruitment sites. However, access constraints meant that not all schools could be included in the study.

Convenience sampling was employed based on participant availability and willingness to take part, ensuring that data gathering could proceed efficiently. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to recruit additional participants, particularly those - such as

undergraduate and postgraduate students - who were not listed in university staff directories.

The recruitment process involved identifying key categories of participants, drawn from different occupational and academic positions within each university. These included:

- School management staff (heads of department, administrative leads)
- Academic and teaching staff (lecturers, professors, teaching fellows)
- Research faculty (postdoctoral researchers, research associates)
- Research students (PhD candidates)
- Postgraduate taught students (master's students)
- Undergraduate students

The table below summarises the participant distribution across the selected universities:

Role	UCL	BCU	ARU
School Management	2	3	2
Academic & Teaching Staff	4	4	5
Research Faculty	4	3	5
Research Students	4	2	3
Postgraduate Taught Students	2	3	2
Undergraduate Students	1	1	1
TOTAL	17	16	18

Table 7 - Overview of Participants

University websites provided publicly available contact details for staff members, allowing for the first round of participant invitations to be sent via email. The number

of participants per category was not fixed or equally distributed across universities; the final composition varied between one and five individuals per category depending on availability and willingness to participate. This flexible recruitment strategy allowed for a more organic engagement with university spaces, incorporating the complexity of each institution's academic and social environment.

Sitework

As noted, in this research sitework emerged as an alternative to the traditional concept of fieldwork, challenging representational methods. Sitework was designed to recognise that the research sites were not pre-existing, fixed entities but rather assemblages of human and non-human forces, materialities, and discursive practices that were always in flux. This contrasts with fieldwork, where there is a location separate from the researcher that must be entered in order to collect data. Building on the multi-site design and the spatial inquiry framework, the sitework was designed to explore how space is enacted, negotiated, and experienced within universities. I understood each of the sites as a specific reconfiguration of institutional relationships. Rather than treating institutions as fixed entities, the study approached them as dynamic spaces of global-local interplay, where material, social, and discursive elements continuously shaped their identities and functions. Through engagement with the participants, mediated by interviews, I was able to take part (entangle) myself in the university space/s. This perspective was informed by Massey's (2005) notion of space as relational, always in the making, and fundamentally shaped by multiplicity. Guided by the spatial perspective that the research assemblage has outlined, I

developed the below list to guide the sitework. It helped me to formulate how my ideas would translate into sites and meaning-making within the university context.

1. Tracing Interrelations

My sitework focused on uncovering the connections and flows that constituted the university space. This involved observing through interviews how people, ideas, resources, and technologies moved across different parts of the campus and beyond. For example, I was interested in learning about the movement of students, tracking the flow of research collaborations, or analysing how digital technologies connected the university to global networks. Similarly, the way participants formed relationships and the individuals they choose to connect with.

2. Mapping Power Geometries

I paid attention to how power operated within the university space. Thinking about who had access to and control over different areas, who was included or excluded from certain activities, and how spatial arrangements reinforced existing hierarchies. For instance, thinking about the allocation of resources and facilities and how that reflected institutional priorities or how the design of public spaces affected the interactions between different groups on campus.

3. Enacting the Global Sense of Place

This meant exploring how the university embodied both global connections and local specificities; documenting the ways in which global influences shaped the university's curriculum, research agenda, and student body; while at the same time paying attention to how the participants interacted with its local environment and how these

interactions contributed to the character of the surrounding community. For example, how the university's architecture reflected both global design trends and local cultural influences.

4. Challenging Fixed Meanings

Massey's framework encouraged me to question the fixed meanings of university space. Instead of assuming that a classroom was simply a place for teaching or a library was just a repository of books, the research explored how these spaces acquired different meanings through their use and how these meanings were contested by different actors.

5. Uncovering Hidden Meanings

The research sought the hidden and overlooked meanings embedded in spatial practices. For example, the placement of statues or memorials on campus revealed the university's inherited values and historical narratives. The design of student accommodation highlighted inherent assumptions about student life and social interaction.

6. Understanding the Production of Meaning

The research sought to analyse how meaning was produced through the interplay of materiality, discourse, and practice. For instance, the university's mission statement might articulate a certain vision of its role in the world, but this vision was also shaped by the physical layout of the campus, the interactions between students and staff, and the university's engagement with the wider community.

This list helped me to navigate further steps of research design whilst allowing to develop a richer understanding of the university as a dynamic and contested space (Matus & Talburt, 2009, 2015; Temple, 2018). It was another machine in the research assemblage that worked towards data gathering, interviews and transcripts.

Data Gathering/generation

In PQI, the process of ‘data collection’ is continuously forming and transforming through interactions between the researcher, participants, concepts, and material conditions. I have abstained from using the term “data collection” in the research assemblage as it implies that there exists data that should be extracted or collected. Instead, I find that “data gathering” better conveys the elements of encounter and creation essential in PQI. Being part of the phenomena studied, it is impossible to “collect” data as the process of research also contributes to its creation.

Initially, multiple forms of qualitative data were considered, including visual data, institutional documents, site observations, and material artefacts. However, after further engagement with the diffractive methodology inspired by Barad (2007), it was decided that interviews would be the primary mode of data gathering. This decision was based on the understanding that a single, immersive data source would allow for deeper conceptual engagement, enabling a more generative and creative inquiry into spatial practices within universities. Rather than seeking to validate, triangulate, or strengthen findings through multiple data sources, the aim was to perform knowledge as an active process of engagement, where meaning emerged through ongoing

interaction between researcher, participant, and material-discursive conditions. The decision to focus on interviews was to prioritise depth over breadth of research assemblage. Engaging with human and non-human actors through interviews and transcripts provided a way to diffract material, meaning that rather than simply analysing responses, the research process itself became a site of entanglement, questioning, and conceptual transformation.

The interview process (interview machine) was assembled to reflect these commitments:

Participant Selection: Interviews were conducted with individuals occupying different spaces and roles within the university, selected through maximum-variation sampling to create diverse perspectives.

Interview Design: Rather than following a set of predetermined questions, interviews incorporated diffractive questioning, allowing participants to respond in ways that expanded, challenged, or reconfigured theoretical understandings dynamically.

Transcripts as Material: Interviews were not treated as simple accounts of experience but as textual and material artifacts, entangled with institutional discourse, spatiality, and relationality.

Online Interviews

In post-qualitative and new materialist research, interviews are not conceptualised as neutral tools for collecting data from pre-existing subjects, but as relational events – emergent sites of co-production, where knowledge, voice, and meaning materialise

through entangled encounters (Augustine, 2014; St. Pierre, 2019). Following this orientation, interviews in this study were treated as intra-active moments (Barad, 2007), wherein the researcher, participants, technology, institutional logics, and theoretical frameworks collectively contributed to the unfolding of the research assemblage. This approach reflected Mazzei's (2013) articulation of "Voice without Organs" – a notion that challenges the idea of voice as a singular, stable expression of an individual subject, and instead frames it as an affective, distributed phenomenon emerging through discursive and material intra-actions.

The interviews in this project were conducted entirely online – a methodological and logistical choice shaped by geographical dispersion, pandemic restrictions, and the transnational focus of the research itself. Yet rather than viewing the digital format as a limitation, I approached online interviews as materially and affectively significant spaces in their own right (Adams & Thompson, 2016; Warfield, 2016). The screen, the interface, the bandwidth, the background environment – all became part of the research encounter, affecting how participants spoke, moved, presented themselves, and related to me as a researcher. As Fullagar (2017) and Marn (2023) suggest, interviews in post-qualitative inquiry are performative: they do not merely represent reality but participate in its materialisation. The use of video conferencing platforms foregrounded this performativity, as participants often navigated between professional and domestic settings, adjusted their presence in response to the camera, and engaged with me as both researcher and co-participant in the temporal-spatial folds of the virtual field.

Throughout the study, I remained critically aware of how these digital conditions shaped the affective tone, rhythms, and textures of our conversations. For instance, the presence of a recording device was not a neutral act of documentation but an agentic force in the encounter (Thompson & Adams, 2013). Some participants became visibly more formal in their speech when the recording began; others performed a heightened attentiveness to institutional representation. This self-awareness and modulation of voice reinforced the idea that interviews are not transparent windows into subjectivity but performances within particular sociomaterial contexts. The interface of MS Teams functioned not just as a conduit but as a participant in the knowledge-making process – shaping what was said, how it was said, and what affective tones were possible.

Guided by post-qualitative and new materialist commitments, I did not use a fixed set of interview questions or seek thematic saturation. Instead, each interview unfolded as a unique event within the research assemblage, co-composed by the participant, the platform, the institutional backdrop, and my own embodied and theoretical presence. The interviews were unstructured, open-ended, and participant-led. Each began with a simple but generative prompt: “Can you tell me about your role in the university?” This opening was deliberately minimal to avoid imposing a frame too early and to invite participants to narrate their trajectories, experiences, and institutional engagements in ways that mattered to them.

From this point of departure, the interviews took divergent paths. Some participants focused on student engagement; others elaborated on administrative pressures, academic precarity, internationalisation efforts, or serendipitous research collaborations. I responded not with a standardised script but through situated

curiosity, following their lead and attuning to the affective resonances of what they found meaningful. When relevant, I drew on concepts such as Massey's (2005) "throwntogetherness" to guide my follow-up questions – asking, for instance, "How did that come together?" or "What were the conditions that made this possible?" These questions were not designed to elicit specific themes, but to stay with the logic of emergence and to attune to the spatial, relational, and affective dynamics shaping each narrative. To prepare for interviews and help with these follow-up questions, I mapped concepts to potential interview questions (a full list can be found in Appendix B).

Rather than being directed by my own research interests in global, relational space, or institutional imaginaries, the conversations were allowed to unfold organically. And yet, without prompting, participants often brought the "global university" into our discussions – a striking reminder that the global is not merely an abstract theme imposed from outside, but a lived condition already agentic in their professional environments. Their reflections on international partnerships, mobility, rankings, language, and identity emerged not as isolated answers to targeted questions, but as part of their everyday navigation of higher education spaces. The global university, in this sense, became visible through participants' own mappings of their roles, concerns, and trajectories – a phenomenon enacted rather than described.

Importantly, this approach allowed for the multiplicity of university life to emerge without being flattened into categories. Each conversation brought forward a different constellation of concerns and intensities, reflecting the uneven and affective geographies of academic labour. The variability across interviews was not treated as noise or bias but embraced as a methodological strength. This diversity revealed how

different institutional actors – academics, administrators, staff – experience, negotiate, and produce university spaces differently, depending on their positions, histories, and relational entanglements. In other words, the online interview functioned not as a standardised tool of data extraction but as a cartographic practice: a tracing of situated stories, affects, and relations that collectively assembled a textured map of the global university from within.

This form of inquiry also foregrounded my own entanglement in the research process. I was not an invisible observer but a participant in the production of knowledge – one whose background, interests, presence, and theoretical commitments shaped the flow of the interviews. Following new materialist understandings of agency, I conceptualised the interviews as affective and material machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), wherein my questions, gestures, silences, and even my digital setup contributed to the overall configuration of the event. I documented these interactions not only through recordings and transcripts, but through reflexive memos and embodied impressions – attending to moments of resonance, discomfort, interruption, or affective charge.

The online format also enabled me to engage with participants across multiple geographical and institutional contexts, reflecting the transnational scope of the research. This spatial dispersion echoed the distributed nature of the global university itself and made the interview encounters microcosms of the very global-local entanglements the study sought to understand. At times, participants logged in from campus offices; at others, from homes, libraries, or conference hotels – each space adding a layer of context to the conversation. These situated digital settings shaped

what stories were told and how identities were performed. A discussion of institutional policy, for example, took on a different tone when voiced from a quiet domestic study rather than from a shared office interrupted by colleagues or ringing phones. These spatialities were not background conditions but integral to the intra-active production of the interview.

Ultimately, then, interviews in this study were not methods in the traditional sense – they were enactments of the very relationality, spatiality, and affectivity that the research aimed to trace. They served less to “collect” data and more to co-constitute knowledge through lived, situated, and digital encounters. By following participants’ leads, staying open to surprise, and allowing theory to function not as a lens but as a companion, the interviews materialised as dynamic, co-authored events. They were performances of the global university – felt, narrated, and enacted in digital space – and as such, they became both method and phenomenon. Through these intra-active dialogues, university spaces were not just discussed but *made* anew in the unfolding of the research itself.

Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) in May 2021 (Appendix C). Ethical practice was guided throughout by the principles outlined in the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines, which emphasise respect, fairness, sensitivity, and the building and maintenance of trust with participants. All

participants were provided with detailed information about the study prior to participation (Appendix D), and informed consent was obtained with an understanding that it could be revisited at any time. Names were anonymised and institutions were referred to using pseudonymous acronyms (e.g., ARU₁, BCU₂, UCL₃), ensuring confidentiality while preserving the relational context of each site.

While formal ethical clearance and procedural safeguards (e.g., anonymisation, data protection, consent) are essential, this study also recognises the limitations of procedural ethics in capturing the full affective, relational, and material complexity of research. Drawing on feminist and post-humanist perspectives, ethics in this study have been understood not as a static checklist but as a continuous practice which emerges through making of relations (Miller et al., 2012; Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). As such, ethical decision-making was integrated into every stage of the research process, including the design of interviews, the relational dynamics of data generation, and the interpretive practices of analysis and writing.

In line with feminist ethics, the research was guided by attentiveness to power, positionality, and relational accountability. My dual position as both researcher and member of the broader higher education community required ongoing reflexivity about how I entered research relationships, how participants understood my role, and how their accounts might be shaped by the institutional context and by our shared professional terrain. Rather than assuming neutrality, I approached the research encounters as dialogic and situated, recognising that the interview space—especially when mediated through digital platforms—was shaped by affective atmospheres, institutional scripts, and power-laden dynamics.

New materialist and post-qualitative orientations further complicate conventional ethical frames by troubling the humanist foundations upon which procedural ethics typically rest. From a post-human perspective, ethics is not simply about protecting individual subjects, but about acknowledging the entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies in the co-production of knowledge (Barad, 2007). This required me to think carefully not just about what participants said, but how interviews were mediated through technologies, environments, and discursive-material conditions. For example, the online format introduced new ethical considerations: participants were sometimes joining from private domestic spaces, or multitasking institutional demands during our conversations. I paid careful attention to the spatial, temporal, and affective contexts of each encounter, adjusting my own practices (e.g., offering flexible scheduling, revisiting consent, pausing or rescheduling when needed) in response to participants' circumstances.

Finally, ethics was conceptualised as an intra-active process, thus emerging from the unfolding relations among researcher, participant, environment, and theory. Following Barad (2007), this ethical stance foregrounds responsibility as response-ability - a commitment to remain attuned to the implications of how knowledge is produced, represented, and circulated. In this sense, the research was accountable not only to participants as individuals but also to the wider assemblages—discursive, institutional, spatial, and affective—within which the global university was enacted. Rather than treating ethics as a bounded moment, this study understood it as an ongoing obligation to care, reflect, and remain open to the complexities of the research encounter.

4.8 Diffractive Analysis

Data analysis in new materialist social inquiry explores how both human and non-humans create affect, and what are the links between matter and meaning as well as how the research process and decision have affected the data. Therefore, analysis works with theory, practice and the micro-politics of research. Jackson and Mazzei (2013) offer diffractive analysis which they define as diffractive readings of research material. Diffraction is developed by Barad (2007) and Haraway (1992) as a way to embrace a different optics in social science studies – diffraction rather than reflection. Barad (2007) states that:

“the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness [e.g., coding], diffraction is marked by patterns of difference [e.g. analysis after coding]” (p. 71-72)

Hence, the central idea of diffraction as outlined by Barad and Haraway is the notion of difference. As a methodological approach, diffractive analysis explores how material objects and processes can be understood through the effects created by their difference, rather than observing what these differences are.

“A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the effects of differences appear.” (Haraway, 1992, p. 300)

As data analysis technique, diffraction ventures beyond standardised readings that reduce the data using a series of concepts to number of codes which are further narrowed into several themes. A diffractive analysis plugs multiple theories into

research materials and reads them through one another in order to disperse and disrupt thought, in contrast to focusing on the sameness. The objective is to open up the data and break up the data so that it spreads in various directions, opposed to condensing. Jackson & Mazzei (2013) characterise this as an analytical process that keeps knowledge production “on the move” and allows new knowledge to emerge without having to organise it based on what already is known. To put this into the context of the present research, diffractive analysis examined how “global” materialises across different university spaces and everyday practices. In qualitative research, this would have involved coding data into predefined categories such as “internationalisation strategy”, “student mobility” or perhaps “collaboration”. In contrast, the diffraction approach traced various intra-actions with local institutional conditions, for example, how participants mentioned the “internationalisation strategy”, why it was mentioned and who and what was involved. In effect, in the discussion of international strategy the micropolitics of it were considered and entangled with materiality like the design of campus spaces, faculty hiring policies, and student recruitment discourses.

To enable this kind of “opening up” of the data, I read the transcripts diffractively—through multiple concepts and through the experiences articulated in the interviews. The excerpt below illustrates one instance of this process: specific concepts were “plugged into” the research material, and, through “acts of noticing” (Tsing, 2015), theory (concepts) and practice (data) were brought into relation.

Concept	Key empirical considerations
Space	Sphere of multiplicity in which distinct trajectories and heterogeneity co-exist
	The product of interrelations; Constituted through interaction.
Place	Characterised by negotiations - 'Thrown-togetherness' of here and now

Table 8 - Concept and Key empirical considerations

Expanding on this, plugging in Doreen Massey's (2005) concept of "global sense of place", a diffractive approach reveals how university's lounge is not merely a space for engagement but also a site of exclusion or marketisation, depending on how students experience and interact with it. Instead of filtering these experiences into fixed themes ("inclusive space" vs. "commercialised space"), diffraction allows researchers to trace the multiple, sometimes contradictory, effects of global positioning within the university. This approach foregrounds complexity and emergence, ensuring that the research remains open to unexpected entanglements between space, discourse, and institutional identity.

The methodological approach as described by Barad has been put to creative use by educational theorists and practitioners such as Jackson and Mazzei (2012) who use diffractive methodology to examine the same set of data from different post-structural concepts of Derrida, Spivak, Foucault, Butler, Deleuze and Barad herself. Iverson and Renold (2016) use writings of Jane Bennett's political ecologies and Gloria Anzaldúa's B/borderlands to examine critical policy analysis drawing on in-depth interviews with high-profile teacher leaders in the US. Diffractive analysis has proven to be a means to discover specific, sensitive topics while keeping critical distance to participants and

their discussions. Lenz Taguchi (2013) employs a diffractive methodology to re-conceptualise early childhood development through collaborative data analysis with her PhD students. Crickmay and Ruck Keene (2022), similarly attentive to the entanglement of researchers and methodologies, examine participatory music education. In their study, they explicitly compare thematic analysis with diffractive analysis. By working diffractively, they were able to engage more directly with the dialogic orientation at the heart of music pedagogy.

Post-humanist research methodologies are increasingly being drawn upon in educational research (Fairchild et al., 2024; Gravett et al., 2024; Snaza & Weaver, 2015) as they enable experimentation with data which in turn opens up space for new thinking that welcomes change.

This emerging work of analysing data in educational research demonstrates how diffractive analysis can make visible new kinds of material-discursive realities that have important epistemological, ontological and methodological consequences. In diffractive analysis, the educational researcher's task is to produce generative mappings that enable emergent possibilities, rather than to trace or reproduce what is already familiar. By mapping space-making practices through interview transcripts of university experience, this study enacts and illuminates processes of the global university that have been overlooked in the existing literature.

The strength in this approach to data analysis is that it provides an opportunity to overcome what global is perceived to be. To do so, it turns to the conceptual framework to pose diffractive questions. Engaging with concepts as a methodological approach intrinsically produces an entanglement of ontology and epistemology, as well

as entangling theory and practice. Crucially, this analysis does not uncover what the 'Global University' is, but rather illuminates how it is being constructed.

Before turning to a practical illustration of data analysis, the following section, "knowing as doing", outlines how knowledge is understood within this analytic approach.

Knowing as doing

The new materialist, post-human stance takes into account that knowing is never done in isolation but is always affected by different forces coming together.

"Knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 185).

"We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because "we" are of the world." (Barad, 2003, p.829)

This means that in a diffractive process of data analysis, a reading of data is done with theoretical concepts that produces an emergent and unpredictable series of readings. In other words, data and theory make themselves intelligible to one another. Various authors offer alternative terms for knowledge to emphasise that knowledge is not obtained but co-constructed. In particular Taylor (2020, p.7) uses verb "knowledge-ing" to emphasise:

- The ongoingness of knowledge-making;
- The becoming of knowledge-making;

- The entangling of knowledge with/in material practices, doings, events and instances;
- The human/nonhuman relations that materialise in what comes to count as knowledge;
- The messy multiplicities of co-creating and co-constituting knowledges plural;
- The uncertain unlearnings that are often engaged in knowledge-ing practices of coming-to-know.

It might be useful for *knowledge making* to refer back to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage. Knowledge is described to emerge as from chaos, which is not its final appearance but as the result of inserting data and theory one into another - "an assemblage of continuous, self-vibrating intensities" (1988, p. 23). Additionally, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that there is no separation between the field of reality, the field of representation and the field of subjectivity. Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders. Hence, data analysis as such cannot be clearly separated from conceptual framework, methods or findings. They are part of the same assemblage that emerges by doing this inquiry. Therefore, data collection, analysis and findings form a consecutive and continuous process.

In reflection the researcher is seen as separate from the world, whereas in diffraction, there is no researcher who is an independent subject but rather an intra-action between human and non-human phenomena. This is why Barad (2007) refers to a relational agential ontology. By this, she is stressing that relations are not secondary

connections between already-separate things. Rather, what come to count as “entities,” “events,” or “objects” emerge through ongoing material-discursive intra-actions, in which boundaries, properties, and agencies are enacted rather than presumed. “Entanglement,” in this sense, does not describe a network of linkages among pre-existing units, nor a general claim that everything is simply connected. It names the ontological condition that the world is composed of dynamic, performative configurations in which agency is distributed and produced in the very becoming of phenomena. As a researcher I cannot separate myself from the global university, neither can I really interpret it, because I am actively involved in the making of it. My research also contributes to it, which is one of the objectives of data analysis, not to represent or understand it but to enact. As Bozalek and McMillian (2017) suggest, diffractive methodology does not contemplate the meaning of texts and data, it is concerned with what phenomena do and how they are connected and co-constituted. This stance is based on the premise of building new and, most importantly, different knowledge, in contrast to codes which seem to re-iterate already existing knowledge that dominate a particular field. The research problem which this inquiry evolves around is mainly concerned with the dominant themes not being an appropriate explanation of ‘global’. As I have stated earlier, the existing literature has acknowledged characteristics and positioning of global university, yet the meaning and the ‘global’ has still been left misunderstood. The existing assumptions underpinning the idea of global university have been built upon assumptions created by wider social structures, the concept itself has not been developed through a clear or coherent theoretical framework. It lacks an internally defined logic, offering little explanation of

what the global university is beyond its alignment with rankings, reputation, and neoliberal agendas. For this reason, diffractive analysis is pursued to tackle the issue with global university being understood through the dominant discourse. Crucially, diffraction proposes to see that not only multiple realities exist but they exist in the same place. It is 'here and now' where global, local and other exist and overlap, co-constituting one another through their mutual entanglement.

Diffractive analysis in practice

Diffractive analysis is a method that foregrounds the entanglement of theory and data, emphasising relationality and emergent insights over fixed categories. The process begins by

- identifying key elements or phenomena relevant to study,
- recognising the various components that will be analysed
- potential interactions.

For this research it was critical to engage with multiple texts and materials related to the research topic. This included academic literature and empirical data, creating a rich tapestry of information for analysis. Therefore in a way, the data analysis predated the development of methodology as it involved texts and ideas stored from the initial stages of doctoral study

The process of working diffractively involved making "agential cuts" to delineate specific aspects of the data that were of particular interest. In diffractive analysis, an agential cut refers to the temporary delineation of specific aspects of the data in order

to understand them, even though they are inherently interconnected. It's like zooming in on a photo, not because that part exists separately, but to help to focus on it for analysis. For example, if study explores university space as "throwntogether", it makes an agential cut by focusing on that aspect while knowing the university is also many other things at the same time.

In the study of global university spaces, diffractive analysis was used to engage iteratively with data and theory. This approach explored how spatial practices enact the interplay between the local and global, making agential cuts according to specific concepts and methods. Below is a step-by-step outline of how diffractive analysis was implemented. This outline expands on the multiple stages and elements involved in developing this analysis and summarises information already discussed in the chapter before proceeding with practical examples of diffraction.

1. Establishing the Theoretical and Conceptual Lens
 - Set the stage for the analysis by grounding it in the theoretical framework of Barad's agential realism and Massey's spatial concepts.
 - Define key theoretical constructs such as "global sense of place," "throwntogetherness," and Barad's concepts of intra-action and material-discursive entanglements.

2. Create a conceptual lens that informs how data will be read and re-read throughout the analysis.

- The first stage of this process involved going back to my conceptual framework and re-engaging with theory. I particularly focused on Massey's theorisation of space
 - as the product of interrelations, themselves constituted through interaction. Both human and non-human.
 - as a sphere of multiplicity in which distinct trajectories and heterogeneity co-exist;
 - as always in the process of being made. (2005, p.9)
- I revisited my notes and summarised the key discussions and characteristics of space. Reflecting on these, I formulated potential diffractive questions. I aimed to create questions that would enable me to connect the theory to the data, allowing for a reciprocal understanding of the data through the lens of the concept and vice versa.

3. Preparing the Data

- Organised data for engagement with theory
- Gathered data sources, including, interview transcripts from conversations with participants about their experiences and perceptions of university spaces
- Made notes on spatial practices and material arrangements within university locales
- Developed a detailed conceptual map and theoretical insights

4. Developing Diffractive Questions

- Formulated questions that guided the integration of data and theory to reveal new insights. This started with taking theoretical propositions and developing them into questions
- Posed the question ‘how do participant narratives reflect Massey’s “global sense of place”?’
- Asked ‘what material-discursive practices are intra-acting to produce the university’s spatial identity?’
- Asked ‘how does the coexistence of local traditions and global policies embody “throwntogetherness”?’

5. Reading Data with Theory

- Conducted iterative, layered readings of the data through the theoretical lens.
- During first reading, engaged with each transcript to get the sense of the conversation and started thinking about what was discussed. I identified key moments and events.
- In the second reading, approached transcripts with concepts.
- Developed a deeper understanding of how space was enacted, rooted in the interaction of theoretical concepts and empirical data.

Illustrative Example

To offer additional detail on the analysis, I here include excerpts from participant interviews and questions that were applied. This provides an illustrative example of the agential cuts made. In this section, I undertake agential cuts on two different participant's quotes, employing a diffractive approach and engaging with theoretical concepts from Massey and Barad. This analysis demonstrates how diffractive readings generate new insights by examining how material-discursive entanglements shape the spatial dynamics of the global university. I have highlighted my cuts and analysis in dark blue below. Each diffraction is followed by a brief analytic vignette that renders visible the spatial practices opened through the cut.

Participant Quote

"It's like the campus brings together the past and the future - you've got these old buildings that feel really historic, but then there are these modern spaces built for innovation." (UCL 3)

Diffractive Questions and Cuts

How does the participant's description entail Massey's idea of "throwntogetherness," where trajectories of the past and present converge?

The participant's language implicitly captures Massey's (2005) notion of *throwntogetherness* - the idea that space is not static but is continuously made through the convergence of multiple trajectories. The co-presence of *historic buildings* and *modern innovation spaces* suggests that the university is an assemblage of different spatial and temporal forces. The term "*brings together*" emphasises an active, ongoing process rather than a fixed state, reinforcing the idea that space is always in the making.

How might this perception of "histories and futures" challenge or support the concept of a "global sense of place"?

Massey's global sense of place argues that place is not bound but relationally constituted through local and global flows. The participant's mention of "past and future" suggests a temporal dimension to this relationality - rather than seeing the campus as a fixed site, it is perceived as an intersection of different timescales.

What material-discursive practices might be enacting this sense of place?

The participant's reference to *old buildings* and *modern spaces* suggests an ongoing negotiation between heritage and progress. This reflects a broader material-discursive practice in higher education where universities simultaneously draw on tradition like

historic and legacy architecture and future-oriented discourses around innovation and engagement.

How does the participant's sense of temporal overlap resonate with Barad's notion of the entanglement of "then and there" and "here and now"?

Barad (2007) conceptualises time and space as entangled rather than linear, meaning that past and future are not distinct but co-constituted in the present. The participant's statement - particularly "brings together the past and the future" echoes this entanglement, where histories are not left behind but actively inform contemporary university spaces.

By posing these diffractive questions, diffractive analysis uncovers the relational and emergent dynamics within participants' experiences, making visible the processes that constitute university spaces as global and local sites simultaneously.

Participant Quote

"Walking through our main campus lounge, you can see people from all over the world speaking their languages. Sometimes people bring in their food. There are always people working together on projects. But also some stick to themselves on the side, by the small tables." (BCU 8)

Diffraction Questions and cuts

How does the participant's description reflect the coexistence of diverse trajectories within the space?

The lounge embodies "throwntogetherness" by hosting people with diverse cultural and linguistic trajectories in the same physical location. The interactions and separations observed suggest both the potential for global connections and the persistence of localised group dynamics.

How does the participant's experience illustrate the global-local dynamics of this space?

The lounge serves as an embodiment of the global university, where local spatial arrangements interact with the global flows of students, cultures, and languages. This interaction produces a "global sense of place" that is inclusive yet segmented, reflecting the tensions inherent in globalisation.

What intra-actions between material (table, physical space) and discursive elements (cultural identities, institutional goals) are at play?

The layout of the lounge intra-acts with the cultural practices of the students, producing a space that is simultaneously cohesive and fragmented. The physical arrangement aligns with institutional intentions to foster informal collaboration but also reflects unintended consequences, such as reinforcing group separations.

How do the material and discursive elements work together to shape the participant's sense of space?

The participant's perception of the space as "welcoming but fragmented" emerges from the material-discursive interplay. The visible diversity (students, food, languages) reflects institutional discourses of inclusivity and internationalisation, while the spatial design mediates how these discourses materialise in practice.

What new possibilities or challenges for enacting global university spaces does this example suggest?

This example raises questions about how intentional spatial design can foster deeper connections among diverse groups while addressing unintended fragmentations. It also suggests that the university's global identity is performative, enacted through the dynamic interplay of material spaces and cultural practices.

The diffraction illuminates how the physical and social design of university spaces enacts complex local-global dynamics. By reading this quote diffractively with theoretical concepts, new insights emerge about the relational and emergent nature of spatial practices in higher education. This approach deepens the understanding of how global universities materialise as spaces of interaction and negotiation.

5 Findings Part I: University and Other Spaces (Relational Geographies)

Introduction

This section, "University & Other Spaces (Relational Geographies)," sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how university spaces function as interconnected nodes in a vast web of relationships. In line with Doreen Massey's concept of relational space, this first part of findings explores universities as dynamic, outward-facing assemblages. Massey argues that places, including universities, are not spatial closures but open to global trajectories and shaped through flows, networks, and interrelations. In this way, the university is understood as a space that is constantly co-produced through its connections to other spaces beyond it.

By situating the university as "being-in-the-world," this section examines the outward connections universities forge, demonstrating how these connections extend far beyond campus boundaries. It delves into the ways universities interact with and influence the wider world, whether through global research collaborations, international mobility programs, digital engagements, or local community projects. Through participant narratives from UCL, BCU, and ARU, we explore vast intra-actions that connect the university to the global flows of knowledge, culture, and economy.

This section is one of the first to explore universities through their wider relational connections rather than focusing solely on the specific, spatial configurations that arise as a result of these connections. It examines how universities participate in the production of global space through their networks, partnerships, and digital entanglements. Universities are portrayed not just as reflective of broader global

processes but as active producers of global space: shaping and being shaped by transnational flows of knowledge, capital, and culture. In doing so, the findings demonstrate how universities serve as nodes in broader relational geographies, or in other words, sites of world-making that extend into the urban, regional, and global realms.

The section also draws on key theoretical frameworks, including Massey's relational space, Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Cresswell's human-environment relations, and new materialist theories that highlight intra-actions between people, environments, and technologies. These frameworks offer insights into how the university operates as a living, relational entity which is connected to and influenced by the world beyond its walls. By examining how the university is linked outward, we can better understand its role in the global knowledge economy and its capacity to engage in place-making at local, regional, and global scales.

Ultimately, this section portrays the university as an institution that actively participates in producing the global, not merely reflecting it, and is always in dialogue with the world beyond. Through participant experiences and theoretical analysis, we begin to see the university as an open site of network-making, continually engaging with the wider world through various flows, exchanges, and transformative practices.

5.1 Global Networks and Flows

In exploring the relational geographies of the university, a prominent strand is the university's involvement in global networks and flows. Diffracting the interview

material, universities are seen as open places continuously shaped by transnational connections of people, ideas, and capital. As Doreen Massey (2005) argued “places are articulations of ... relations that are not fully contained within the place itself. [They] are not closed or bounded – they are always in open-ended process” (p.23).

The material here illustrates exactly that open-ended process: the university emerges as a node in far-reaching networks, an assemblage of relationships stretching across continents. Through a diffractive analysis of participants’ narratives – read through Massey’s relational space, Lefebvre’s production of space, Cresswell’s notions of mobility and place, Tsing’s assemblages and “friction,” Haraway’s relational ontology, Latour’s actor-network theory, and related perspectives – this subsection shows how the university is constituted through global interconnections. In short, the university is a porous assemblage involved in world-making across scales, from the global to the local.

Several interrelated dimensions of global relationality which have been well documented in literature came to the fore in participants’ accounts: (1) the culturally diverse composition of university communities as a product of global mobility; (2) extensive transnational networks of research and innovation linking each institution to far-flung partners; and (3) market-driven flows of students and resources that tie the university into the global knowledge economy. These dimensions are deeply entangled. What Latour might call the actor-network of the “global university” is an ever-expanding web of human and non-human actors – students, faculty, funding bodies, technologies, recruitment agents, publishers, etc. – whose interactions produce

what we recognise as a “global” institution. The following discussion weaves participant voices with theory to illuminate how their actions bind to them.

Global diversity of people and cultures

One striking aspect of the university’s global networks is the daily presence of people from around the world in campus life. Staff at all three institutions celebrated the cosmopolitan mix of students and colleagues in their midst. A lecturer at UCL, for example, described how the richness of intellectual life is inseparable from the diversity of its people:

“My university is obviously a place of open inquiry and very intelligent people... so you get to meet a lot of very interesting people from all kinds of backgrounds. UCL in particular is very global, so I like the fact that it’s very diverse – I get to interact with people from a range of different backgrounds” (UCL7)

Here we see Massey’s relational space in action: UCL as a “meeting place” of trajectories from across the globe, its identity forged through encounters among people of varied origins. The university is not experienced as a closed campus; it is “open to the outside,” continually constituted by inputs from elsewhere. This openness was framed by participants as a source of vibrancy and learning – “*very nice to be around,*” as the UCL lecturer put it – confirming Massey’s point that an open place can

“lay the ground for critiques of exclusivity”. Indeed, the global mix of people challenges any parochial or exclusionary notion of who belongs in the university.

This embrace of diversity was echoed in a different context at BCU, a post-92 university in a diverse British city. One BCU educator proudly explained that while their university “*is not very high in the [league] tables,*” its mission is transformative because of who it serves.

“A lot of our students are ethnic minorities and they’re the children of immigrants, right? We’re changing lives – my university brings in students and sends them out into the world with a better chance... And to me that’s what the global university is” (BCU6)

For this lecturer, being a university is about inclusivity and social mobility across the world, educating students from marginalised communities and equipping them to succeed in the wider world. He contrasts this with his own alma mater that boasted of only “*10% ethnic minorities, 10% international students*” – an exclusivity he calls “*a joke*”. His narrative positions the university as actively global in composition (over “*60%*” minority or international students at BCU) and global in its impact on life chances. This perspective resonates strongly with Massey’s vision of place as “always under construction” by outside relations. BCU’s student body is a direct outcome of migration histories, diasporic flows, and widening participation efforts – global processes that have reshaped the local city of Birmingham into a cosmopolitan space. The university, in turn, serves as a microcosm of global society and a lever for social

change, sending graduates “*out into the world with a better chance*”. In Cresswell’s terms, the mobility of people (students moving from overseas or from immigrant families into higher education) generates a new sense of place on campus, defined by movement, mixture, and opportunity rather than any fixed traditional identity of a university.

Notably, another ARU lecturer extends the idea of global connectivity beyond who comes to the university – he argues the university must also actively reach outward.

“There’s so much need out there... so many marginalised societies that... they don’t come to the university, right? So we have to go to them – particularly internationally – and that’s the global university to me.” (ARU4)

This is a powerful reimagining of the university’s spatial reach. Rather than viewing “global” simply as international students on campus, he sees the global university as one that travels and forges engagements in communities worldwide, extending educational opportunities outward. We might think of this as the university performing what Donna Haraway (along with Karen Barad) would call “relational ontology” or “intra-action,” actively co-constructing relationships across distance rather than remaining *insular*. The university’s space thus spills into wider world, intruding into and interconnecting with distant communities. This proactive stance also hints at an ethical dimension as commitment to global social responsibility. It brings to mind Massey’s notion of a “global sense of place” which carries a *political*

responsibility” to those beyond one’s immediate locale. The BCU educator explicitly frames this as an existential imperative for universities:

“Universities can’t stay insular because that’s how they die... We need to diversify our portfolios. We need to help people in ways that are more expansive and intrinsic than, ‘oh, here’s a degree, goodbye.’” (BCU10)

In other words, the survival and relevance of the university hinge on embracing open, outward relations, engaging with difference and diversifying what universities do. This sentiment aligns with Lefebvre’s idea that new social relationships call for new space - the university must produce a new kind of space for itself (one that is outward-facing, networked, and inclusive) to remain viable. It also reflects Massey’s political point, an open, globally-engaged place inherently challenges the closed, elitist model of academia. And we see here how we have moved from outreach activities to lived and worked on by individuals.

Transnational knowledge networks and collaborations

Participants also described the university as embedded in extensive global networks of research and innovation. In line with Latour’s actor-network theory, these accounts show that what we think of as a “local” university project is often assembled through connections that span multiple scales. The deputy dean for research at ARU gave a striking example of this trans-scalar networking, explaining how much of their

research is funded through international partnerships. She noted that a lot of their projects use European funding.

“European Regional Development Fund money. So we work very closely with local government partners – Essex County Council, Cambridge, Peterborough... – but usually as part of a European consortium, so quite large projects where we look after our regional or national contexts within a wider European project. We’ve also got projects that cover the North Sea region, working with Sweden, with the Netherlands, with Germany.” (ARU10)

Here the local and global are thoroughly interwoven as ARU addresses regional development needs *within* the framework of EU-wide initiatives. The university is literally an assemblage of actors across scales local councils, regional authorities, and European transnational networks, all brought into alignment by a shared project executed by people ‘on the ground’. This exemplifies what can be called trans-scalar relationality, due to the project’s success relying on linking the local to the global, situating a local problem (say, economic development in Essex) in a transnational knowledge exchange with partners in Sweden or the Netherlands. Bruno Latour would likely highlight that there is nothing mystical about “global” here, because it is achieved through the connecting of multiple localities (Essex, Amsterdam, Gothenburg, etc.) into one coordinated network. The “place” of ARU’s research is thus not just Chelmsford or Cambridge (ARU’s campuses) – it is a network-space that includes bits of Brussels (EU funding mechanisms), offices in partner universities

abroad, and even the North Sea as a geographical region of focus. In Lefebvre's terms, this is the *production of space* on a global scale. Social relations (between university and various partners) actively produce a new spatial reality of cross-border research space with its own routines, meetings, travels, and flows of resources. ARU's identity as a research institution is co-constituted by these global linkages; as the deputy dean put it, "we... look after our [local] context within a wider European project". The local and wider scales are mutually defining, not opposed.

Such global collaborations are also about the flow of ideas and expertise – a reminder that knowledge itself travels. In one ARU project the deputy dean described partners from multiple countries jointly explore the "*changing nature of work*" under Industry 5.0 technologies, with ethnographers from the UK, Italy, Sweden, Germany each examining different contexts. Knowledge production here is inherently networked and comparative; it is through the friction and synergy of these international collaborations that new insights emerge. Indeed, Tsing's (2005) concept of "friction" – the productive awkward engagement across difference - is relevant: "the 'friction' of global connection [yields] new alliances, new antagonisms, and new forms of value that mediate far-flung relations". (p.5)

By working together across nations, the university and its partners forge new alliances (e.g. innovation networks, industry links), possibly encounter antagonisms (differing priorities, cultural approaches to research), and create new value (knowledge, technologies, publications, policies) that shape global and local practices. The deputy dean's pride that ARU "*punch[es] above our weight*" in research by leveraging these networks underscores that participating in global circuits of knowledge is a form of

world-making: it allows even a smaller, teaching-focused university to influence wider conversations and outcomes. We might say the university is engaged in global knowledge flows, both drawing in ideas from elsewhere and sending out ideas that travel beyond its immediate locale.

Global networks are not only built through formal research projects, but also through the movement of students and faculty themselves in less tangible knowledge circuits. One BCU leader highlighted that even their *doctoral programs* now span the globe. He noted they have

“over 300 doctoral students... some are UK based, but the majority are global. We have quite a large number from the United Arab Emirates, some in the States, some in Japan – kind of spread all over, really.” (BCU₄)

These are largely distance or multi-site doctoral students, suggesting that BCU’s doctoral education has become deterritorialised and not confined to campus. The doctoral program is effectively a global network in itself, connecting professionals around the world to BCU as an educational node. This kind of global reach is enabled by digital technologies and periodic travel, compressing space-time in the manner described by theorists of globalisation. It reflects what Tim Cresswell calls the politics of mobility: only certain institutions and students can mobilise in this way (e.g. English-speaking, internet-connected, relatively privileged to pursue a doctorate remotely). This case shows how a university can “stretch” its educational space globally, enrolling students who may never physically enter the campus library yet are

fully part of the university's research community. The place of the university here is truly "*a simultaneity of stories-so-far*" (to use Massey's phrase) gathered from around the world. A doctoral seminar might include professionals dialling in from Dubai and Tokyo alongside locals in Birmingham, a convergence of global trajectories in a virtual space of learning. This reinforces Lefebvre's point that space is a social product, the University's "doctoral space" has been produced by socio-technical activity (online platforms, international marketing, transnational supervision arrangements) such that it is no longer tied to a singular geographic locale. Instead, the network (made through interaction) is the space. Latour would likely point out that the "global university" is not a scale above the local, but rather the result of linking many local interactions (an advising session here, a research site there, an online discussion across time zones). Each local node (e.g. a student in UAE working on a dissertation) is connected to the network that is the doctoral program. The effect is a transnational academic community, but one that also encounters challenges of distance and difference.

Friction, challenges, and the global market.

Importantly, participants did not portray global flows as an unambiguously smooth or positive phenomenon, they also spoke of frictions and contradictions that arise when universities become enmeshed in global networks. The BCU senior academic, for instance, observed that supervising a globally distributed cohort of students can surface cultural mismatches in academic expectations. In his words,

“we’re operating in this global environment, but [we’re] not always aware of... localised expectations” (BCU9)

He described how in certain countries or educational cultures, students have very different notions of the student-supervisor relationship and what constitutes original work. In some contexts, wealthy students are *“used to paying people to do their work for them”*, or see education as a service they purchase, which clashes with the UK academic ethos of independent scholarship. This mismatch has led to instances that, from the BCU staff perspective, verge on what would be labelled plagiarism or academic dishonesty, even though the students involved may not view it through the same moral framework. Such examples vividly resonate with Tsing’s friction - global connections bring disparate practices into contact, generating “expectation gaps” that must be negotiated. The staff have had to invest considerable effort in “smoothing out” these cultural differences, essentially, a work of translation and mutual adaptation. New intercultural communication practices and supports have had to be developed to manage the diverse cohort. In Tsing’s terms, this friction is productive as it forces the university to innovate in how it mentors and evaluates global students, potentially leading to more reflexive and culturally aware pedagogy. Yet it is also clearly challenging and at times fraught (*“fractured and difficult,”* as he said of some supervisory relationships). What counts as the student’s “own work” is no longer self-evident when the university’s network expands to academic cultures with different norms. Here we see that global flows can destabilise local practices, requiring actors to redefine rules and standards in the new relational context.

Another friction arises from the globalisation of the student market and the university's financial dependence on it. Participants voiced ambivalence about the pressure to attract ever more international students as revenue sources. The UCL lecturer bluntly critiqued "*the business of thinking of the university as a business*" – the managerial drive to treat education as a market commodity. She linked this to an imperative from above to

"tak[e] more and more students... even sometimes when they're not qualified... especially for master's students to increase revenue" (UCL₃)

This comment reveals a perceived tension between academic standards and financial motives in the global higher education market. Master's programs in the UK are indeed often populated by large numbers of international fee-paying students, and universities have been accused of lowering admission barriers to maximize enrolment. The UCL academic experienced this firsthand:

"Sometimes... I've said [this] about my teaching – I feel like the students that were accepted maybe shouldn't have been, and I feel like we accepted them just for their money, and then I'm expected to try to teach them... it was quite difficult." (UCL 3)

This candid admission underscores the human cost of market-driven global flows. Faculty on the ground faced overloaded classes with students who struggled undermining the learning experience for both teachers and students. It was a clear

example of how global economic imperatives intra-act with local pedagogical relations, often negatively. The global flow of tuition money and students was not a neutral input; it reconfigured the classroom space, introducing new challenges and labour for staff (needing to support underprepared students, possibly in larger classes than ideal) and frustrations for students (who might feel lost or underserved). Lefebvre's notion that "*space... is always political and strategic*" seems fitting here. The university space was being (re)produced according to a neoliberal strategy to maximise fee revenue which had political effects (e.g. questions of equity, quality, and labor conditions in education). The UCL lecturer's critique was essentially a resistance to the "*ideology of space*" that Lefebvre warned of - the treatment of university space as a profit-oriented enterprise rather than a place of inquiry.

The global student recruitment industry itself was described in detail by the ARU deputy dean, shedding light on the complex networks and actors involved. He referred to the role of international recruitment agents as a "*weird intermediation*" in this global flow of students:

"you have these intermediaries who basically recruit students in-country and charge 15 to 20% of the fees for the students they bring us. From a business perspective that looks really good because we get all these students... but again, that creates this strange kind of intermediation... the agents are selling [the university] to the students in ways that aren't always how we would present it." (ARU 5)

In this description, the university's global network extended to third-party agents scattered around the world – effectively private brokers who connected international students with universities (for a considerable commission). These agents operated in places like India, China, Nigeria (markets the participant specifically mentioned having visited or targeted). They were part of the actor-network of the global university, even though they were neither faculty nor students nor formal university staff. The participant's account suggests that these actors brought their own translations and representations of the university to prospective students, sometimes misaligning expectations (like overselling certain aspects). This again introduced friction, students might arrive with promises or impressions given by agents that didn't match reality, leaving staff to manage disappointment or confusion. It also raised ethical questions about the commodification of education – agents “take cash from both ends” (both the university and often an additional fee from the student for visa services) , essentially profiting from the aspirations of mobile students. From a Latourian perspective, one could say the actor-network of global higher education was populated by many translators: the recruitment agent translating the university into a marketable product in a local context, the faculty then having to translate the student's expectations into the terms of the actual course, and so on. Each translation could misfire, hence requiring constant negotiation.

Yet these very intermediaries and infrastructures had become integral to how the university functioned. The ARU deputy dean reflected on this with a theoretical bent, noting that when we talk about the “global university,” we must consider

“those kinds of global processes of intermediation that create the global university. The publishers, of course, are another big one... then the funders like the EU that want particular types of international collaborations – that’s the environment we operate in.”
(ARU5)

In this remarkable quote, the participant was essentially mapping the assemblage of non-human and human actors that constituted the global higher education landscape. Recruitment agents, multinational academic publishers, transnational funding bodies (like the EU), ranking systems (implied by the pursuit of “performance metrics” and “research superstars”, and so on. This aligned with a new materialist sensibility (Haraway or Barad) and Latour’s Actor-Network Theory - the “*global university*” was not just an institution in one place, it was an effect of all these networked relations among people, organisations, technologies, and capital. The participant’s reenumeration of intermediaries’ echoed Bruno Latour’s argument that what we call “global” is the sum of all the connections and mediations that link distant actors. There is no global university without those concrete linkages – they “*create the global university*”. In other words, the university is porous, continually constituted through its interactions with actors far beyond the campus. Knowledge flows through publishers and conferences; money flows through funders and tuition payments; people flow through migration and recruitment; ideas flow in collaborative projects. Each flow involves translation across differences (cultural, linguistic, organisational), generating frictions and new arrangements.

Summarising these insights, we see that global networks and flows permeate the university's spatial and social existence. The empirical narratives illuminate that the university is inherently a transnational space - its student body, faculty careers, research collaborations, and revenue streams are all entangled with global mobility and exchange. This underscores Massey's proposition that even seemingly local places are "collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space" (p.265). The power-geometry here involves global capitalism (neoliberal education markets, precarious labour of adjuncts noted by the UCL lecturer, geopolitical structures (e.g. EU funding frameworks shaping what research gets done), and cultural circuits (ideas of what a university education means traveling across countries). Henri Lefebvre's notion that space is political is evident in how global ranking and market logics impose certain strategies on universities, sometimes at odds with local academic values. At the same time, the participants' stories also highlight agency and possibility because they show staff actively navigating and reshaping these global relations: from the BCU lecturer reinterpreting the global university as a force for inclusivity, to the ARU manager finding ways to harness international partnerships for regional benefit, to the UCL scholar cherishing global diversity while pushing back on corporatisation. In a relational ontology sense, the "university" becomes an emergent entity produced through all these interactions. It is not a static container affected by external global forces; rather, it only comes to life through its relations (students-staff-agents-partners-policies etc., all intra-acting). The boundaries of the university are constantly in flux. Following Barad, that "boundaries do not sit still" in the phenomenon of the global university. The campus boundaries are traversed daily

by flows of information and people, making the institution a boundary-crossing assemblage.

In sum, the first findings section portrays the university as a porous, networked, world-making assemblage. Its place is an open node in global webs, and its space is continually (re)produced by flows of people, knowledge, and capital that connect the local to the global. This global connectivity brings tremendous opportunities – intellectual diversity, expanded reach, collaborative innovation – but also significant tensions and inequities to be managed. The concept of “friction” helps us understand how global and local meet in practice. Not as a smooth fusion, but as an ongoing negotiation that can spark creativity and contestation in equal measure. Through these global relationships, universities also partake in world-making. For instance, they contribute to shaping global knowledge agendas, economic markets (e.g. the international education industry), and social landscapes (through the migration and mobility of graduates). Yet importantly, all of this global activity is always grounded *somewhere*. As Massey reminds us, even the most global place is still a place, a junction of trajectories. The next subsection, “Engaging City and Community”, turns to that grounding by examining how the universities engage with their immediate urban locales and communities. If *Global Networks and Flows* has highlighted the universities spatial engagement with the planetary and transnational scale, “Engaging City and Community” moves the gaze of the findings towards the local/regional scale by exploring how universities navigate their relationships with the cities and regions they call ‘home’. This shift continues the diffractive analysis of scale, from the global down to the regional and local, and indeed how actors ‘move’ through these scales. As

we shall see, the porous boundaries that let in the world also let the university's influence out into its neighborhood, meaning that the global and local are deeply imbricated, each shaping the other in the relational geography of the contemporary university.

5.2 Engaging City and Community

Beyond global circuits of research, participants also highlighted how universities embed in cities and communities, engaging with local environments and public. Tim Cresswell argues that place is “a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world” (p.11), born from people's interactions with their surroundings. In this vein, academics in our study did not treat the university as an island separate from the city; rather, they actively linked their work with external communities, organisations, and urban issues, thereby giving the university extended meaning as a place.

In this subsection, we explore how universities and their members reach beyond campus boundaries to engage with surrounding cities and communities. Taking a relational geography approach, the findings reveal universities as deeply embedded in local and regional ; thus not being detached from the world, but actors co-constituting urban life. Participants from UCL, BCU, and ARU described myriad ways their universities connect outward into city spaces, from the mundane routines of commuting and lunch outings to formal partnerships in regional development. These narratives were read diffractively alongside urban theory, drawing on Saskia Sassen's global city networks, Richard Florida's creative cities, Paul Temple's insights on built

environment in higher education, John Goddard's civic university model, and related scholars, in order to illuminate how universities function as assemblages that both shape and are shaped by their urban milieu. Through this layered analysis, universities can be viewed acting as urban/regional anchors, cultural nodes, and everyday inhabitants of the city, co-producing the social and spatial dynamics of their locales. For instance, an ARU administrative leader described how her role connects outward to organise events and partnerships. In her words, *"I get to... do sessions with [students]. I can get external organisers [and] funding to do events"*, making her job *"quite interesting and busy"* (ARU₁₄). with new people coming in and out. Every day is "different" in this dynamic, outward-facing role. Through such activities, the campus became a permeable space open to community collaborators, whether bringing in external speakers, hosting public workshops, or co-sponsored events. The university here functioned as a hub within the city's social fabric, where knowledge flowed both ways: academics shared expertise outward, and community actors brought real-world perspectives inward. This richly aligns with Lefebvre's idea that space is socially produced through practice and engagement; the lecturer is actively producing the university space as a public-facing, interactive realm, not just a cloistered workplace. Similarly, at BCU, academics often oriented their research toward pressing societal and urban problems, effectively linking the university to the community's challenges. One BCU lecturer recounted doing projects on *"food poverty and food banks and holiday kitchens"* (BCU₁₂) in the city – topics directly tied to local social welfare. By researching and presumably working with charities or policymakers on food poverty, he was blurring the line between campus and community, making the university an actor in

the urban social landscape. Another BCU faculty member developed an initiative to help students overcome “anxiety in statistics” via a bite-size online module, which not only served students inside the university but also responded to an educational need likely observed in the broader context of incoming adult learners. In doing so, she identified a gap affecting people transitioning from industry to academia and crafted a solution, effectively bridging the university with the diverse backgrounds of the city’s populace (e.g. those without prior psychology training). These examples illustrate what Cresswell might call the “in-between” of people and place – academics adapting university practices to connect with who is outside (community members, non-traditional students) and what is outside (social issues, local knowledge).

Crucially, such engagements demonstrate that the university is not a closed campus, but an active participant in its environment. The *place* of the university is made through “attachments between people and place”, using Cresswell’s phrasing; in these examples, attachments between scholars and their city. One UCL participant even yearned for a broader outreach in teaching, saying he’d “*like to... teach people from... more varied backgrounds*” (UCL13) including those from the global South, recognising that high fees impede that diversity. This sentiment underscores an ethical ideal of the university as an inclusive global-local place, open to “*Southern... backgrounds*” and not just serving those who can pay. In practice, whether through public events, community-focused research, or striving for inclusive access, the university space is co-produced by myriad stakeholders, students, citizens, external partners, who intra-act with academics. As Lefebvre notes, social space is a product of many intersecting processes, and participants actively negotiate those intersections. In this study that

includes turning the university into a venue for community dialogue, a resource for local development, and a site where urban life and academic life converge.

Universities in the City: Global Hubs and Local Anchors

A striking feature is the dual role of universities as global knowledge hubs and local anchor institutions. In the case of UCL, situated in the heart of London, participants highlighted the global connectedness afforded by a major city. One UCL doctoral student noted the advantage of being in a metropolis where academic networks abounded; for instance, the opportunity to attend an inter-university public policy workshop with peers from LSE and King's College London, an event that underscored the dense scholarly community London offered. At the same time, this environment revealed differences in scale and context between institutions. As the student recounted, King's had "*40 plus PhD's*" in his field compared to UCL's smaller cohort, a fact that was "*quite a shock*" but also beneficial in fostering closer-knit interactions (UCL6). This anecdote exemplifies how a city like London enables both collaboration and healthy comparison among its universities, forming a networked urban setting that Saskia Sassen would characterise as a key node in global circuits of knowledge and people. Indeed, global cities concentrate talent and resources, creating what Sassen calls "spaces of production" for advanced knowledge services. They generate intense demand for high-level talent – academics, creatives, professionals – who are drawn into these urban hubs. The presence of multiple top universities in London reflects this dynamic, each institution plugged into international networks while sharing the city as a common platform.

Yet even as UCL thrived in a world-city environment, the university also played an anchoring role in its local context. London's status as a global city was not just an abstract backdrop but part of UCL's daily reality, because it attracted a diverse body of students and staff and offered endless opportunities for engagement beyond campus. One UCL student spoke about the social advantages of living and studying in London. Initially, *"living in London on your own can be quite intimidating when you don't know anyone,"* (UCL15) he admitted. But the university community became a crucial bridge into the city. Senior PhD colleagues helped *"show you around if you need to... know something about someplace,"* easing the newcomer into London's vast urban landscape. While *"of course you can Google it,"* he noted, *"there's nothing quite like human interaction"* for learning to navigate the city. In this way, the university cohort serves as a social infrastructure for engaging the metropolis, peers acting as guides to neighbourhoods, transport, and local culture. The participant's experience illustrates how a university in a global city helps newcomers acclimate and find community in what could otherwise be an anonymous urban setting. It also underscores that the flow of knowledge is not one-way (university to city) but mutual. Students learn from the city via experienced peers, while their presence and exploration animate the urban environment. The city becomes a learning space, and the university becomes an urban community in its own right.

Not all universities, however, enjoy the benefits of a metropolitan city location. Some operate in smaller cities or regions where their role as an anchor institution for the local community comes even more to the fore. ARU provides a contrasting case – a post-1992 university with campuses in mid-sized cities (Cambridge and Chelmsford) in

the East of England. ARU's senior leader described the institution's historical and regional roots: originally founded as the Cambridge School of Art by John Ruskin in the 19th century, ARU was "*very much a widening participation university, a teaching-intensive university*" (ARU13). This mission reflected a commitment to serving local populations and students who might not otherwise access higher education. In effect, ARU was a locally anchored university by design, in contrast to UCL's global research-intensive profile. He emphasised that despite ARU's teaching focus, it produced high quality research, often through projects tightly linked to regional needs . A large portion of ARU's research funding came from European and regional sources aimed at economic development. "*A lot of our funded research... is ERDF European Regional Development Fund money,*" he explained, "*so we work very closely with local community*" (ARU13). These collaborations placed ARU at the centre of a network of regional bodies, tackling applied problems in the East of England. Such initiatives showed ARU acting simultaneously at the regional scale as a driver of local innovation and skills with councils and industry, as well as at the international scale via EU-funded knowledge exchange. This aligns with what John Goddard terms the *civic university* role - contributing to regional development and social innovation while still engaging globally through networks like Horizon Europe. ARU's experience demonstrates how a university outside a major metropolis can nonetheless function as an important urban/regional actor, leveraging transnational connections to serve local ends. In Goddard's words, a civic university "*integrates teaching, research, and engagement with the outside world such that each enhances the other*" (2016, p. 362).

ARU's teaching mission, regional research, and external partnerships are intertwined in just this way, reinforcing one another.

The literature suggests a spectrum of university-city relationships. At one end, we see what Cochrane (2017) calls a "wannabe global city regionalism," (p.521) where a university and its city both strive for global status. He describes a highly ranked university positioning itself as a global institution while the city attempts to brand as a burgeoning global city-region. The two actors align their strategies - the university attracts students from overseas and across the country (though still drawing many from the surrounding region), and it becomes positioned as a change agent supported by local agencies. This symbiosis manifests physically in urban development - creating an urban campus that can transform city spaces. The university's plan in that case explicitly ties its own fortunes to the success of the city region and is committed to boosting the city's standing as a "dynamic node in the global knowledge economy". This scenario resonates with ambitions seen in cities like London or Manchester, where universities partner with civic authorities to drive metropolitan growth and global visibility.

At the other end of the spectrum are universities that are local by necessity, embedded in regions with fewer options for global posturing. Such an institution might serve a declining industrial area, drawing the bulk of its students locally and focusing on practical education for the community. These are portrayed as universities in an urban subregion with a "poor external image," largely catering to local students and businesses, while a more elite university (perhaps a branch campus of a prestigious institution) also operated in the vicinity. In that context, the local university embraced

an identity as a business- and community-oriented university, addressing the workforce needs of local industries, even if it did not supply the high-prestige labour for specialised sectors (which the elite institution handled). This kind of university fills an anchor role for its city – providing education and social mobility for residents, partnering with local employers, and often acting as a stabilising economic force in an otherwise struggling area. We might see echoes of this in BCU’s position in Birmingham.

Historically, Birmingham’s economy was marked by industrial decline and regeneration efforts, and BCU (formerly a polytechnic) emerged to serve local students in a city also home to the older, more elite University of Birmingham. By positioning itself as “the University in the Heart of the City” (a phrase communicated by BCU), BCU has explicitly taken on the mantle of the local civic university for Birmingham. Such institutions exemplify what Goddard describes as urban anchor institutions, providing possible sources of stability in local economies due to their relatively steady employment and investment, even during economic downturns. They also actively contribute to *place-making* – shaping the city’s identity and infrastructure. In BCU’s case, the university’s expansion into the city center (with major campuses at Eastside and around Curzon Street) has been part of Birmingham’s urban revitalisation, regenerating old industrial districts into an educational and creative quarter. As one study notes, there is a broader trend of “reurbanisation” in higher education, with campuses moving from isolated greenfield sites back into inner-city locations and becoming more integrated with urban development (Addie, 2017). BCU’s relocation of many faculties from suburban campuses to a downtown site in the 2010s is a prime

example of this trend. The university literally building itself into the city fabric. This physical integration not only contributes to the city's redevelopment (new buildings, public spaces, foot traffic, cultural venues), but also symbolically signals the university's commitment to being part of the civic life of Birmingham.

Civic Engagement and Urban Responsibilities

Universities do not engage cities only through grand development schemes or strategic plans, they also connect in more immediate, grassroots ways. Many participants described civic engagement activities that link the university with the public, aligning with the idea of the university as a civic institution serving societal needs. A course leader from BCU, for instance, expressed a personal mission to close the gap between academia and the broader community. He was emphatic that *"university education [should not stop] beyond the boundaries of our campus,"* decrying the *"massive chasm between what we're doing and the people it's actually affecting"* (BCU8). In his view, traditional academic output like *"papers in journals that no one ever reads"* was insufficient and even *"useless"* if it failed to make a difference in people's lives. Instead, he sought *"impact that changes people's lives, real world impact"*. This passionate stance epitomises the ethos of the civic university: knowledge should flow outward, inform and empower the community, and not remain in academic isolation. The BCU academic, who served as a knowledge exchange lead, actively promoted this outward-facing approach among his colleagues, championing engagement as equally important as teaching and research. Translating this ethos into practice, he described a number of outreach initiatives. At the most basic level, he said,

“I very, very often go and talk to [local schools]... trying to encourage them to consider higher education.” (BCU8)

Such school outreach visits, which occur “very often,” was a way of planting the seeds of university aspiration in the community’s youth, demystifying university for those who might not see higher education as within their reach. Additionally, he was developing what he called “*guerrilla pedagogy*”, in particular, putting on public lectures and educational events outside the campus, in everyday community venues. He envisioned “*lectures and things in community venues like village halls, town halls...free entry*” as a means to open up access to knowledge. The goal was explicitly to “*demystify [the] town versus gown thing*”. In using this classic phrase, town vs. Gown, he invoked the historically fraught relationship between universities and their host communities. In many university towns, a divide has persisted where local residents (the “town”) and the academic community (the “gown”) live in parallel worlds with little interaction or understanding. The participant recounted that at a university he previously attended, there was

“a real problem with the people in the community not knowing what was happening at the university and vice versa” (BCU8).

Determined not to replicate that disconnect, he insisted “*there is no need to not have those two things come together*”. By taking lectures out to public halls and inviting

anyone in, he aimed to bring town and gown together in shared learning experiences. This reflected the civic responsibility of the university to disseminate knowledge beyond enrolled students, to invite the public into the intellectual life of the institution (even if metaphorically the “invitation” meant the university coming out to meet the public). Such efforts align with Goddard’s notion of the “quadruple helix” of innovation, which extends the university-government-industry triple helix to include civil society as a fourth partner. Here we see a very direct engagement with civil society - the university (through an enthusiastic academic) offering educational value directly to the community, not mediated by formal economic or governmental channels. It also resonates with John Dewey’s ideal of the democratic university as one that contributes to an informed citizenry in its locale.

However, undertaking these community initiatives was not always straightforward. Academics noted challenges, particularly around funding and institutional support. Many outreach projects had been supported by Erasmus+ grants (the EU’s program for education and community development), and with the UK’s exit from the Erasmus scheme, there was uncertainty about how to sustain some programs going forward . While new funding streams (like certain UK or Horizon Europe grants) existed, they often came with different priorities and bureaucratic hurdles. This highlights an important point about universities’ city/community engagement: it is often enabled (or constrained) by higher-level policy environments. European Union initiatives, national government programs, and city funding can all empower universities to launch outreach efforts or partnership projects. The withdrawal of such funding can create a void, requiring academics to adapt or otherwise innovate to keep community programs

alive. Despite these challenges, the academics remained committed to “*helping people and making sure that life for students is better than it was when I was a student...it’s worth it in the end*” (BCU₂). This determination underlines that the civic mission often relied on individual champions within universities, even as it ideally was embedded in the institution’s structure. Moreover, individual efforts were key even if there was all the possible support from policy – the impact was still enacted by human, non-human interaction.

ARU offered another perspective on formal university-community linkages, particularly in the realm of regional economic development. As mentioned, ARU worked closely with local authorities and councils. The Deputy Dean detailed partnerships with entities such as *Essex County Council* and the *Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority*, often as part of ERDF-funded projects. These projects typically aimed to drive innovation, support small businesses, or skill-up the local workforce – classic missions of a civic university acting in regional development. For example, ARU had hosted or participated in initiatives to assist SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in adopting new technologies or in conducting research that helped local industry sectors. One such project that was highlighted was a collaborative Innovation Centre run with a national research organisation (the Welding Institute), which secured funding to study the future of work in advanced manufacturing across several countries . While this was an international consortium, ARU’s role was partly to bring back knowledge and benefits to its region, connecting East of England companies and workers to broader European innovations.

This dual orientation, outward to global best practices, inward to local application, is a hallmark of effective regional engagement. It ensures that the local community doesn't get left behind in fast-moving fields like Industry 5.0 technologies, aligning with the European Commission's emphasis on *Responsible Research and Innovation* (which stresses inclusion of society in research). ARU's activities here illustrate how universities can serve as bridges between global networks and local communities. They can act as conduits bringing external funding, ideas, and partners into the region, translating them into concrete local benefits. Conversely, by representing their region in these networks, academics making up universities also put their city/region on the map (literally in the case of EU project maps). This reinforces what Goddard observed in case studies of English cities like Newcastle or Bristol – that a truly civic university sees the “success of the city region as vital to the university's own” mission and vice versa, leading to a mutual commitment to enhance the city's status in the wider knowledge economy. In ARU's case, while Cambridge was world-famous due to the University of Cambridge, ARU had carved out a role as Cambridge's civic university, contributing in ways the older research-intensive institution might not focus on (such as supporting regional SMEs or widening participation for local youth). Together, they complemented each other in enriching the city and region, echoing the “division of labour” seen in some other regions between an elite institution and a more locally-oriented one.

In these narratives, we see that engaging city and community is not an optional or peripheral activity for universities, but increasingly part of their core identity (or at least a strongly articulated goal). Whether it's BCU's public lectures and school visits

or ARU's council partnerships and European projects, universities are acting as key nodes in their city's social and economic development. They serve as educational providers not just to enrolled students but to the wider populace, as conveners of public dialogue, as sources of expert knowledge for local problems, and as catalysts for development. In the language of civic engagement, universities contribute to the social capital of their cities by building networks of trust and exchange between academia and the community. They also contribute to cultural capital in the city by offering arts, lectures, and other events (many universities host public art galleries, museums, or speaker series that draw in the community). Economically, their role as anchors is significant. Universities often rank among the top local employers and purchasers of services, and their student populations inject spending into city businesses. Unlike corporations, universities are relatively rooted in place due to this stability they can be pillars of local economies. Goddard notes they are less susceptible to downturns, meaning in rough times they can help to hold a city steady. The flip side is that universities themselves rely on the health of their city. A declining city population or a struggling local economy can limit a university's intake of students and ability to attract staff. Thus, self-interest drives many universities to invest in their communities. Through mechanisms for improving local schools, safety, culture, and infrastructure, the university is also improving the environment for its own operations. The strategic plans of universities now often explicitly reference civic engagement, community partnership, or urban impact – a trend reflecting both internal values and external pressures (e.g. the UK's *Knowledge Exchange Framework* and metrics for “public and community engagement” encourage universities to formalise these roles).

Place and Praxis: Everyday Assemblages of Campus and City

While institutional strategies and civic projects form one layer of university–city engagement, another equally important layer is the *everyday practice* of inhabiting and traversing the city. Universities engage the city in countless mundane ways, through the daily commutes of staff and students, the lunch breaks spent in local cafés, the after-work gatherings in nearby pubs, or the simple fact of people moving between campus and city streets. These seemingly ordinary activities actually weave the university into the urban fabric. Doreen Massey’s notion of relational place is useful here – the idea that places (like a campus or a city neighbourhood) are constituted by interactions and flows rather than static boundaries. The campus spills out into the city as students ride buses and trains from their homes, as professors grab coffee from the nearby shop, or as study groups meet in the public library. A vivid example came from the UCL PhD student’s account of having lunch with visiting academics. UCL’s Department of Political Science hosted a weekly seminar series where they “*invite an academic from another university...they come in for the seminar and we go for lunch with them*” (UCL12). This routine of going out to lunch not only facilitated scholarly exchange in an informal setting, but also patronised local businesses and inserted academic conversations into public spaces. It is a small-scale illustration of how the university community uses the city as an extension of campus. The streets, cafes, and eateries become sites of intellectual engagement just as much as the seminar room, a phenomenon reminiscent of the classic image of Oxford dons debating in pubs, or students in Paris huddling over books in a café. Such interactions enrich the urban public sphere, blurring the line between where the university ends and the city begins.

Commuting patterns also demonstrated the porous boundary of campus and city. At ARU, BCU and UCL alike, many staff did not live adjacent to campus; they travelled from suburbs or nearby towns. The UCL student noted, for instance, that his supervisors “*live about an hour away from UCL*” (UCL₄) and therefore only came to the city on the days they teach, to avoid unnecessary travel. In a massive metropolitan area like London, a one-hour commute can mean living in a completely different town, so these faculty are part-time urbanites. When they do come in, they bring their expertise and labour into the city’s core; when they stay home (perhaps working remotely), the city feels their absence. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, he recalled, the normally bustling corridors were eerily quiet – “*the hand dryers would go off... and you’d think is it a ghost or a person?*” (UCL₄). It was a reminder of how much the physical presence of university people animated the city environment around campus. In more normal times, he estimated “easily more than half” of the professors were back in the office on a given day. Still, the trend towards hybrid work meant the flows of people between city and campus were in flux. ARU staff similarly mentioned not “hanging out around campus” (ARU₁) beyond teaching obligations, in the pandemic’s wake. The once-common informal encounters on campus had declined when fewer people were present. Universities thus influence city rhythms, the timing of classes can stagger or concentrate pedestrian flows, and the academic calendar can create peak cycles for rental markets and retail (e.g. quiet summers, busy term times in college towns).

From the perspective of mundane mobilities, the university appears as an assemblage of daily journeys. Some students walk or bike across town to class, contributing to the city’s pedestrian life; others drive in from farther regions, impacting traffic and

parking; still others are remote or commute occasionally, interacting with the city more sporadically. One could map the daily paths of university members to see the reach of the institution into the city's geography. This would probably result in a wide web extending into residential areas, transit lines, and public spaces. In Birmingham, for example, BCU's main city campus sits next to a major transport artery (Curzon Street and near New Street Station); the schedules of thousands of BCU students and staff add to the web and flow on those streets. When BCU expanded its campus, it "dramatically transform[ed] one of the main transport arteries" (Addie, 2017) of the city, not only by construction altering the streetscape, but through the ongoing movement of people it generates. Urban planners increasingly recognise universities in city centres as key drivers of foot traffic and street life, contributing to the safety and vitality of city areas that might otherwise empty out after business hours. The presence of students at all hours can help a city feel more dynamic, which ties to Richard Florida's argument that cities as hubs of creativity thrive on a constant buzz of activity and interaction.

Indeed, Florida's creative class thesis offers another lens on these everyday engagements. Florida argues that talented, creative professionals (from engineers to artists to academics) are drawn to cities that offer a rich cultural and social milieu – places that are diverse, open-minded, and alive with things to do. Universities contribute strongly to this milieu by attracting young, educated populations and international diversity, and by sponsoring cultural events. But the city too must hold up its end: "world-class universities" alone won't make a city thrive if the broader environment is not welcoming and vibrant. In that manner the global university needs

the normal, mundane activities to spill into the city as part of ‘business as usual’ processes. This contrasts with the building of prestige through highly rated publications or strategic relationships.

As Florida (2002) famously noted, cities like Pittsburgh or St. Louis struggled to grow “despite their deep reservoirs of technology and world-class universities” (p.249) because they were not perceived as sufficiently tolerant or exciting to *attract and retain top creative talent*. In contrast, the most successful creative cities (he cites San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, etc.) combine Technology, Talent, and Tolerance – the “3 Ts”. They have strong universities and industries (technology), a skilled workforce (talent), and an open, diverse culture (tolerance). Translating this to the UK context, one might say London and Cambridge tick all three boxes, whereas a city like Birmingham has the first two (good universities, a large talent pool) and has been actively working on the third – promoting itself as diverse and culturally vibrant to shake off any lingering negative images.

One BCU academic’s experience spoke to the importance of an open city culture: he embraced a “very sort of socialist” outlook that students and the public “subsidise us [academics] to allow us to do things we wouldn’t otherwise do”, implying a reciprocal obligation to give back knowledge freely. This kind of attitude flourishes in a civic environment where town and gown respect each other. Florida’s research would suggest that academics (as part of the creative class) are more likely to stay in a city that values such openness. His findings also indicate that *diversity attracts talent*: places scoring high on diversity indexes (e.g. with thriving LGBTQ+ communities and arts scenes) tend to draw more creative professionals. For universities, this means their

location can significantly affect recruitment of star faculty and students. A cosmopolitan city like London or an attractive smaller city like Cambridge is itself a draw. Conversely, if a university is located in a place perceived as boring or intolerant, it may struggle to compete, no matter its academic calibre. Thus, the everyday city life – cultural festivals, nightlife, restaurants, the friendliness (or hostility) of the community – all feed back into the university’s success. Participants indirectly touched on this interplay, the UCL student mentioned how older peers introduced him to places in London, suggesting the importance of the city’s social offerings for student life. If London had nothing to offer outside campus, that social advantage would evaporate. In Birmingham, efforts by universities and the city to create a welcoming environment (from opening up campuses to the public, to contributing to city cultural events) aim to ensure that graduates and faculty see a future there rather than taking their talents elsewhere.

Physical campus spaces themselves also act as mediators between university and city. As Temple (2014) observes, some universities are inseparable from their physical setting in the public imagination - “Some universities are almost defined, at least in the public mind, by their physical presence – Cambridge, Heidelberg, or Cornell, for example.” (p. 2). The iconic colleges of Cambridge embedded in the town, or Heidelberg’s classical campus in its old city, have made those universities into prominent features of the cityscape, attracting tourists and conferring a sense of prestige on the locale. In such cases, the university’s architecture and layout actively shape how the city is experienced (Cambridge’s courtyards and lawns, for instance, influence the flow of tourists and students through the city’s centre). Conversely, the

city's character seeps into the university. For instance, UCL's cluster of historic and modern buildings in Bloomsbury contributes to London's "Knowledge Quarter" ambiance, alongside museums and libraries; BCU's new buildings in Eastside are reshaping a post-industrial district into an education and arts quarter; ARU's campus in Cambridge, while more modern and slightly off the tourist track, still benefits from Cambridge's identity as a city of learning (and in Chelmsford, ARU's campus gives a newer city a growing academic profile).

Temple cautions, however, that reading too much into architecture can be misleading. Buildings send messages, but those messages can be interpreted in multiple ways. He gives the example of the University of Manchester's grand neo-Gothic buildings. One observer might see them as reflecting "the city's civic pride and wealth" during the peak industrial years, while another could see "capitalism's exploitation of factory workers" behind that wealth, thus viewing the same architecture as a monument to social inequality. Either way, those buildings are "charged with allegorical significance", functioning as cultural currency in the city. They become talking points, symbols around which city narratives coalesce, whether celebratory or critical. For Birmingham, the modern design of BCU's Parkside Building or the renovated industrial shells of its art school can similarly be seen as symbols of the city's 21st-century transformation from industrial to creative economy. For Cambridge, ARU's presence is less famous than the ancient University of Cambridge, but ARU's very name (honouring John Ruskin) and its visible campus still contribute to Cambridge's story as not only elite and historical, but also modern, inclusive, and practical in orientation.

Temple also argues that campus spaces contribute to the creation of a “sense of place” and community within the university. This sense of place is not isolated from the city – often it is entwined. A welcoming campus that blends with city streets (open campuses with public thoroughfares, like UCL or BCU’s city campus) can invite the public in and encourage interaction. On the other hand, a gated or insular campus (perhaps some out-of-town universities) might physically separate students from the city, reinforcing a town–gown divide. Among our cases, UCL is very porous (its buildings are just part of the urban street grid of London), BCU’s city campus is also open-access urban space, while ARU’s Cambridge campus is somewhat enclosed but still centrally located in the city. The more everyday movement and visibility there is between campus and city, the more each is implicated in the other’s “sense of place.” One participant’s story about chatting with a professor at the coffee machine for an hour speaks to an informal community on campus. But imagine if that coffee machine is accessible to visitors or located in a café open to the street, then city residents could also be part of such serendipitous conversations. Increasingly, universities host public-facing spaces: cafes, bookstores, art galleries, makerspaces, and parks that anyone can wander into. This contributes to what Richard Sennett called “narrative space”, places that people can appropriate and imbue with their own meanings, becoming “personified places” tied to personal and collective stories. A city-university district with mingling crowds can generate new narratives. A local entrepreneur might meet a researcher at a university event and start a collaboration; school children visiting a campus museum might feel inspired to pursue science; residents attending a public lecture might form a book

club. These are small stories, but cumulatively they are the texture of a civically engaged university in action.

Co-Producing the Urban Assemblage

Stepping back, the data and analysis point to a conception of universities and cities as co-producing each other. This could be viewed as an entwined assemblage rather than separate entities. The university is not only in the city; in a very real sense, it is of the city, and vice versa. Similarly, city and university are of the world, actively co-producing it. We can think of the university as an assemblage of people, buildings, ideas, and practices that is plugged into the larger assemblage of the world's infrastructures, communities, and economies. They overlap and intersect in countless ways, producing emergent effects that neither could achieve alone. For example, the cultural vibrancy of London emerges from the presence of institutions like UCL (among others) that draw international talent and create intellectual buzz. Without universities, the city's "creative class" ecosystem would be greatly diminished, or at least would differ greatly. Simultaneously, UCL's global academic standing is enabled by London's status as a cosmopolitan hub that attracts scholars and students. This mutual reinforcement is evident in strategic rhetoric. UCL's slogan "London's Global University" explicitly ties its identity to the city, while London often touts its universities in branding itself as the "education capital" or innovation capital of the world. In the case of ARU, the university's regional engagement (with councils, EU projects, local industry) helps drive economic and social development in its cities; those cities in turn provide ARU with students, with real-world laboratories for

learning, and with a community mandate that shapes ARU's teaching and research priorities. BCU's efforts in Birmingham similarly show a feedback loop: by investing in community outreach and creative industry partnerships, BCU helps raise the skill level and cultural capital of Birmingham's populace, which makes the city more attractive to investors and residents – and as Birmingham grows into a more dynamic city, BCU stands to benefit from a larger pool of potential students and collaborators.

The theoretical frameworks underline this co-production. The *global city* concept (Sassen) implies that universities in places like London become part of global production networks – financial, cultural, academic. Their fortunes rise and fall with the city's global position. The “creative city” idea (Florida) suggests that universities and cities must collaborate to create an environment that nurtures creativity; a university can supply educated talent and a city supplies lifestyle and openness, and together they spark innovation. The civic university model (Goddard) explicitly treats the university as a civic actor working with other urban institutions (government, industry, civil society) to jointly produce regional development. Our participants' experiences bear this out. An individual at ARU working with county councils is essentially practicing the civic university credo, co-producing development strategies with local government. Paul Temple's insights on space and place remind us that the physical co-presence of university and city elements (buildings, streets, people) creates a material assemblage that influences how knowledge is created and shared. As Temple notes, when university buildings become part of the city's landscape, they acquire meanings in the public discourse (e.g. Manchester's Victorian edifices symbolizing civic pride), and they also provide stages for interaction (a public lecture

hall can host community debates). Thus, the built environment is a key interface of co-production – it's where policy (a new campus building) meets daily practice (students and locals walking through that space) and yields either integration or segregation.

Finally, assembling these pieces through a diffractive analysis allows us to see nuances that a single perspective might miss. Rather than viewing global ambition and local commitment as opposing tendencies, our analysis shows they are often intertwined.

For instance, aiming for global status can go hand-in-hand with intense local city-making (building an urban campus, aligning with city planners). In our data, ARU's international projects served a very local agenda of regional growth – the global and local diffracted through each other. Similarly, mundane practices and grand strategies intermingle. For instance, a casual lunch with a visiting scholar contributes to the global knowledge network in an unplanned way, just as a formal city-university partnership agreement does in a planned way (often the first one leads to the second).

By reading participants' narratives through the layers of theory, we appreciate that engaging city and community is not a single act or program, but an ongoing, multi-scalar process. It happens in lecture halls and in village halls, in council boardrooms and on buses, in policy documents and in personal relationships. The university community, made up of academics, students, staff, are citizens of their city (and world), and the city's residents are stakeholders in the university. As one academic asserted, students and society effectively “subsidise” academics by giving them the license to pursue knowledge, which creates a moral imperative to reciprocate. Many universities are coming to recognise this not as charity, but as part of their purpose.

When a university truly engages with its city and community, both sides are enriched. Knowledge flows more freely, opportunities expand, and a shared sense of place and pride can develop. In the words of that BCU professor, bringing town and gown together “makes us all stronger as a result”. The university and the world co-produce each other’s futures, and in that fusion lies the promise of a more inclusive and dynamic life.

5.3 Synthesis: A Porous, Relational Assemblage

Through these sections, a clear picture emerges: the university is fundamentally unbounded, defined less by its bricks and concrete than by the relationships and movements that flow through it. Our participants depict the university as a relational geography in Massey’s sense – a meeting point of global trajectories, local engagements, technological networks, and political currents. It is an assemblage of people, places, and things, continually co-produced through interactions. Knowledge circulates through global collaborations and conferences, giving the university a presence on distant others. At the same time, local community ties and urban initiatives root it in place, preventing it from floating free of context. Digital tools and practices stretch its spatial and temporal reach, enabling new forms of academic life that cut across here/there and now/then. And through activism and critical reflection, university actors negotiate the values and power relations that shape academic space, linking campus to the wider socio-political world.

In line with Lefebvre’s and Massey’s theories, space here is alive and dynamic, it is “a simultaneity of stories so far” rather than a static container. The university’s outward

relations are not peripheral, they are constitutive. By embracing movement, flow, and linkage, the university becomes a porous node in a web of global world-making. Each partnership, each student cohort, each online innovation, each protest – they are threads weaving the fabric of the university’s spatial reality. As one ARU academic put it, reflecting on the serendipitous links in academia, “*it’s such a small world*” after all. Her remark, though casual, echoes the deeper insight that the space of the university is the space of connection.

Ultimately, this findings section underscores a post-qualitative, new materialist sensibility that the university arises in the intra-action of human and non-human agents, professors, students, Zoom rooms, cities, policies, all co-constituting what the university is. The university is a living, breathing constellation of relations beyond it, always linked to places beyond. Hence it can be suggested that it is both local and global, both physical and digital, scholarly, political, commercial, urban, civic etc. In other words, the university is an open assemblage, forever in the making. These situated narratives of UCL, BCU, and ARU academics demonstrate how global imaginaries and social futures are actively produced within and through the university. It clearly is a relational and open space, with ideas, people and power flowing in and out an ever-evolving space of encounter in the world.

6 Findings Part II: Making of Global Imaginaries – Belonging and Becoming

Introduction

This section builds on the preceding exploration of the university as a porous, relational institution embedded within the flows and interconnections of the wider world. Here, attention turns specifically to how global imaginaries, understood as shared visions of world and belonging, mobility, and worldliness, are produced, lived, and contested within university locales. The preceding findings chapter investigated ways in which the university and the world constitute each other. In contrast, this section focuses on the locality and situates those relations. ARU, BCU, and UCL emerge as sites of being-in-the-world enacting relational spaces where global imaginaries take form. Framed through theoretical insights global imaginaries are understood as materially, discursively, and affectively co-constituted through situated practices, infrastructural engagements, temporal negotiations, and collective imaginings. This chapter situates the making of global imaginaries in the locales, through the micro-practices of becoming and belonging that contour the university as a vibrant, porous site of global possibility.

This section grounds itself in Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of place as a "constellation of trajectories", a dynamic and contingent convergence of intersecting life paths, socio-material relations, and historical currents. University campuses are thus understood as meeting points of global flows and lived experience, sites where diverse histories, aspirations, and infrastructures collide and coalesce. Approached through the concept of global imaginary, the global is produced through the local,

through embodied relations, institutional politics, affective encounters, and infrastructural negotiations. These constellations of trajectories are composed not only of people, but also of ideologies, technologies, objects, and temporal rhythms, all of which are entangled in the production of a collectively shared sense of being-in-the-world beyond borders.

In tracing these processes, the analysis also draws on Appadurai's (1996) theorisation of global cultural flows which are the disjunctive, overlapping movements of people (*ethnoscapes*), technologies (*technoscapes*), ideas (*ideoscapes*), media (*mediascapes*), and capital (*financescapes*). When read through Massey's relational lens, these 'scapes' are lived and situated, materialised in classrooms and research projects. Further enriching this reading, the chapter incorporates Appadurai's notion of "grassroots globalisation", the bottom-up, situated forms of global connectivity and resistance enacted by marginalised actors. Global imaginaries are not only shaped by elite institutional agendas or dominant logics, but they are also constantly being reworked from below, through everyday acts of care, improvisation, aspiration, and resilience. Whether it is a BCU lecturer mentoring under-resourced students into prestigious postgraduate pathways, or an ARU academic navigating technological frictions to deliver transnational programs, these practices are material enactments of globality in the mundane textures of university life.

Accordingly, the section is organised into three interwoven sub-sections:

Situated Practices and Scapes focuses on how global imaginaries emerge through spatialised, embodied, and relational practices within specific institutions. This sub-

section highlights how university actors actively navigate and reconfigure Appadurai's scapes through their daily work and movement.

Entangled Temporalities, Affects, and Materialities attends to the rhythms, infrastructures, material conditions, and emotional intensities that enable and constrain global belonging. Drawing on Massey's emphasis on time-space compression and trajectory convergence, this sub-section illuminates how universities enact global as an uneven, affectively charged process always in flux.

Collective Imagining and Being explores how shared imaginaries of the global university emerge through academic co-presence, storytelling, pedagogical encounters, and infrastructural entanglements. Engaging Barad's and Haraway's ideas of worlding, this sub-section frames the university as a site of co-becoming in a globally entangled world.

Together, these sub-sections demonstrate that global imaginaries are material-discursive and affective formations, shaped through the entanglement of infrastructures, temporalities, emotions, and everyday relational practices. By tracing how belonging and becoming are lived across 'scapes', institutions, and assemblages, this section contributes a spatially sensitive and theoretically rich account of what it means to inhabit and co-produce the global university today.

6.1 Situated practices and university-scapes

Global imaginaries take shape not in the abstract, but through situated, day-to-day practices in the university. In a post-qualitative, new materialist vein, this analysis

treats space as relational and always under construction (Massey, 2005), and the “global” as something enacted through embodied routines, technologies, and interactions (Barad, 2007; Appadurai, 1996). University actors constantly navigate what Appadurai (1996) calls the scapes of globalisation – flows of people, ideas, technologies, finance, and images – reworking these into new patterns. Rather than being passive recipients of a monolithic “globalisation,” lecturers and staff actively reconfigure these flows in context. In other words, the global imaginary – conceived as a “shared mental framework” (Steger, 2008) or sense of world community – is produced and felt through their everyday spatial, embodied, and relational practices. It is not something hovering above practice; it “pushes and pulls through them,” becoming real through repetition, resistance, and reconfiguration (Steger, 2008). The university thus emerges as a site where global imaginaries materialise via what one participant called “bridges... where everything overlaps”, even as important elements are “overlooked” (BCU12). In what follows, we see how staff at ARU, BCU and UCL articulate and negotiate these overlaps – engaging with ethnoscaples, ideoscaples, technoscaples, and beyond in their work. One clear manifestation of the ethnoscape (flows of people across borders) is the diverse student populations that lecturers engage with, requiring new pedagogical negotiations. For instance, an Anglia Ruskin lecturer described the cultural and educational gaps she encounters when teaching a Master’s programme dominated by international students:

“It’s quite challenging because the MBA programme has a large international cohort of students, mostly Asian, particularly from India. So we see a big difference in how they know education and what we know as education in the UK. For them, it seems almost like they’re given everything, whereas now they’re a bit stuck, because they’ve got to do things for themselves... they’ve got to show all that autonomy, and especially at [postgraduate] level it’s quite difficult, quite challenging.” (ARU3)

Here we witness an embodied, relational practice of making the global classroom work. The lecturer must mediate between different educational ideologies – navigating an ideoscape of learning norms that collide in one space. The UK university expectations of student “autonomy” meet students’ prior experiences of rote or guided learning, creating friction. Rather than viewing this simply as a deficit on the students’ part, we can see it as a generative tension through which a new, hybrid practice emerges. The global imaginary is being co-produced in these moments of negotiation: the very idea of what a “good education” means is stretched and rethought in daily interactions.

This aligns with Massey’s insight that place is a “constellation of trajectories” (Massey, 2005), in this case, trajectories of pedagogical practice from India and the UK intersecting in the classroom. The global is enacted in the room, as bodies, cultures, and knowledge traditions intra-act (Barad, 2007). The lecturer’s role became one of translation and triage, guiding students through unfamiliar academic expectations

while herself learning to adjust. In her words elsewhere, she often became “a triage person” for these students’ needs, filtering them to the right support and helping them find footing (ARU21). Through such spatialised and relational work, global imaginaries of learning – notions of what it means to “become global” as a student – are continually crafted and contested on the ground. If the ARU example shows the local classroom as a contact zone of worldwide cultures, one participant at BCU highlighted the university’s role in bridging local and global communities. A BCU lecturer embraced a vision of the “global university” as fundamentally connected to marginalised publics beyond the campus. Describing his institution (which serves a high proportion of immigrant-background and minority students), he stressed that being global means actively reaching outward:

“There’s so much need out there... so many marginalised communities that don’t come to the university. We have to go to them, particularly internationally, that’s the global university to me.” (BCU19).

Here the ethnoscape (students and communities moving or not moving across borders) and the ideoscape (the idea of the university’s mission) intertwine. Rather than a colonial model of exporting knowledge, he imagined a two-way engagement where the university inserted itself into global circuits of support and empowerment. This BCU academic explicitly framed his approach through the concept of the “glocal university.” In an impassioned reflection, he compared global education to McDonald’s adaptive menus around the world – a metaphor for respecting local difference within global reach:

“Along with the global university, we’ve got to look at the ‘glocal university’. The distinction between global and local has never been more important than it is now. The best example I can use is McDonald’s – they have restaurants all over the world, but their menus aren’t exactly the same everywhere, because to access those markets they have to diversify what they’re producing and selling. And that’s what globalisation has to look like. We can connect the world together, but we’ve got to do it on their terms. That’s where this idea of Western colonialism or imperialism as the ‘best way’ falls apart – you’ve got to entice people to become part of a global community. You’ve got to offer them something they can take from it and, more than that, something they can give to it... That’s where I’m sitting... that’s my position.” (BCU1)

In this rich excerpt, the lecturer is effectively reconfiguring the ideoscape of higher education. He rejects the one-size-fits-all, Western-centric model of globalisation – decolonising the imaginary of the global university by insisting that global connectivity must be built on local relevance and mutual exchange. His notion of “enticing people towards a global community” resonates with Steger’s (2008) idea of the global imaginary as relational and shared; it’s about creating a world where others want to participate because they see their own values and contributions recognised. This account also underscores the relational practice of building a global imaginary: it’s not just about having international students on campus, but about what relationships and

exchanges are fostered. Indeed, the same BCU participant was critical of superficial internationalisation. He argued that simply “plugging up numbers” with foreign enrolments or touting diversity statistics is “almost offensive” if universities do not actually engage those students. In his words, some institutions “raid the international market... because international students are worth more... in pounds than the local kids” (BCU₁) – a practice he found denigrating to all involved.

Such frank critiques reflect an acute awareness of the financescape of academia (the global flow of tuition money and capital) and how it can distort the university’s global mission. Yet by voicing these concerns, the lecturer is also performatively reshaping the global imaginary – pushing it back toward ethics of care, equity, and genuine cross-cultural dialogue rather than revenue metrics. His everyday work (e.g. leading knowledge-exchange projects across Europe and championing outreach) exemplifies how global imaginaries are not only imagined but enacted through concrete projects and values on the ground. Technology, too, plays a pivotal role in how global connections are lived in academia, highlighting Appadurai’s technoscape (flows of technology and digital information). A lecturer at UCL described how her research collaborations have long been inherently transnational, relying on digital tools to sustain a dispersed network of colleagues. Discussing the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, she noted that it hardly changed the fundamentally networked nature of her scholarship:

“To be honest, I think it’s fine – I don’t think it’s had a negative effect on research collaboration, at least in my case... All my co-authors are all over the world anyway, so it’s kind of always been like that. Maybe we would have met more frequently at workshops or conferences before the pandemic, but on a day-to-day basis it’s always been over the phone or e-mail.” (UCL5)

This narrative illustrates how a global imaginary of academic work is sustained through digital co-presence. Long before “remote work” became a buzzword, scholars were co-writing articles via email and holding meetings across time zones. What changed with the pandemic was the scaling up of these practices until they became the norm for everyone – effectively collapsing the distance between “here” and “elsewhere” in everyday university life. The UCL lecturer’s experience spoke to spatialised practices that were not bounded by a single campus: her “place” of work was simultaneously London, Washington DC, Berkeley, Stockholm, or any node where her collaborators resided. In Massey’s terms, place is relationally produced – a network of interactions rather than a fixed location. The campus, the home office, and the online platform become one entangled workspace. This technological entanglement (Barad, 2007) reconfigures the meaning of proximity. The embodied presence is supplemented (and sometimes supplanted) by virtual presence. Notably, the lecturer did not perceive a loss of quality in these collaborations. If anything, they highlighted how a sense of global community in academia could be actively forged through shared projects despite physical separation. Her account resonated with a BCU researcher’s description

that “we’re not based in a single place anymore... most of our interaction happens online – we meet, we share, we adapt as we go” (BCU19). Both examples demonstrate how technoscapes and mediascapes (e.g. digital communication platforms, global media of conferencing) facilitate an imagination of belonging to a global academic collective. The global imaginary here was experienced as a daily practice of co-production of knowledge, with affective ties and professional identities forming across continents. These academics were becoming-global in their working habits – inhabiting a world where the local office was a node in a dynamic, deterritorialised network of knowledge (Appadurai, 1996; Steger, 2008).

Across these narratives, we see that global imaginaries are neither purely top-down nor disembodied. They are made and remade through situated practices – through teaching international students, through rethinking institutional missions, through digital collaboration, and even through contesting university policy. In each case, university actors engaged with Appadurai’s scapes in transformative ways:

- ethnoscapes of student and staff mobility were met with new pedagogies and support structures;
- ideoscapes of globalisation were critiqued and reimagined in more inclusive terms;
- technoscapes were leveraged to stretch the spatial reach of everyday academic life;
- and financescapes were navigated carefully, with ethical concerns raised about the commodification of education.

Rather than being overwhelmed by global flows, these practitioners worked within entanglements of local and global, matter and meaning – exemplifying Barad’s (2007) point that boundaries (e.g. between “campus” and “world”, or “us” and “them”) are constantly being re-constituted through practice. The global imaginary, as Steger (2008) describes, is “deeply relational”. Here we have seen this in the relationships between lecturer and student, university and community, researcher and digital network, academic values and market forces. These empirical vignettes lend analytical clarity by grounding the concept of the global imaginary in tangible actions and emotions. They show how a “sense of world community” (Steger, 2008) materialises in the university. Opposed to a grand slogan, in the spatially distributed classrooms, the blended curricula, the collaborative projects, and the principled push back against reductive globalisation. In sum, global belonging and becoming are situated achievements. Through spatialised, embodied, and relational practices, university actors are continuously navigating and reinventing the coordinates of the global – making the “global university” an ever-evolving reality they help bring forth.

6.2 Entangled Temporalities, Affects, and Materialities

This sub-section examines how global imaginaries are enacted through the intra-active interplay of temporal rhythms, material infrastructures, and affective atmospheres within everyday university life. Drawing on Doreen Massey’s notion of space-time as always in flux and Karen Barad’s theory of material-discursive entanglements, the analysis foregrounds how academic life is not only spatially situated but also

temporally stretched, emotionally charged, and materially mediated. Here the findings of the study trace how mundane infrastructures (forms, emails, digital platforms), emotional intensities (anticipation, anxiety, hope, exhaustion), and uneven temporalities (deadlines, mobility, asynchronous collaborations) work together to enact a global sense of university space. The university's global imaginary is enacted through the messy, ongoing entanglement of time, matter, and feeling.

Temporal Disjunctions

Universities operate within a complex past–present–future continuum. They are sites where histories of empire and migration linger in buildings and policies; where present-day practices unfold through international collaborations and strategic plans; as well as where imagined futures like academic success, social mobility and “*global*” relevance are continually projected and pursued. This layering of times gives rise to specific affective orientations among participants. These include hope and aspiration toward future possibilities, anticipation and anxiety about what is to come, but also frustration and exhaustion in the here-and-now. As Massey suggests, place is a “constellation of trajectories,” always in the making; likewise, the university's global space-time is a convergence of many personal and institutional paths in motion. Participants in the study often described being pulled in multiple temporal directions at once as they navigated the demands of a “global” university career.

At BCU, for example, one lecturer detailed how the pressure to deliver measurable outcomes on tight cycles reshaped her daily work:

“You’re doing twelve hours of teaching, and then we have to do office hours, admin, marking. There’s just no time to think, let alone to write something meaningful.” (BCU11)

Here, the temporality of the globalising university is not expansive or leisurely – it is compressed, regulated, and extractive. The present is dominated by managerial rhythms (teaching hours, paperwork, metrics), leaving little room for reflection or creativity. This compression carries an affective cost: the emotional labour of keeping up and the stress of constant busyness and the guilt of having “no time” for meaningful scholarship. It reveals how global competitiveness is felt on the ground. Ambitious global frameworks (e.g. pushing international excellence or productivity) translate into a sense of time scarcity in everyday academic life, as illustrated by the lecturer’s palpable exhaustion and frustration.

This dynamic is echoed by a participant at ARU who discussed juggling multiple, misaligned calendars:

“You have your own teaching schedule, the university deadlines, and then there’s the research funding calls, which follow a completely different timeline – often driven by European or international agendas.” (ARU4).

This quote highlights the temporal disjunctures of global academic work. An academic must operate across asynchronous systems, local teaching semesters, national audit cycles, and international funding deadlines – each with its own pace and priority. These overlapping time-scapes frequently clash, creating friction and stress as one tries to meet all demands. Yet in those very disjunctures lie the negotiations through which global imaginaries are enacted. The “global” here is not a seamless flow but a patchwork of rhythms that must be continuously synchronised and managed. One is always balancing different futures and commitments – an EU grant proposal due next year, tomorrow’s lecture, a forthcoming accreditation – and in doing so, actively making the global university in real time. As one ARU staff member noted,

“We deliver high-quality student experience, making sure REF 2027 isn’t that far away... balancing staff needs and welfare is the trickiest part.” (ARU7).

Institutional cycles like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) explicitly project years into the future, embedding anticipation into daily practices. The present work of teaching or managing staff is suffused with a gaze toward that future evaluation, underscoring how deeply the present is shaped by future imaginaries in material ways (meetings, workload allocation, support structures).

Material Infrastructures

Crucially, these temporal negotiations are inseparable from the material infrastructures and affective currents that constitute university life. The fabric of the

global university is woven through everything from bureaucratic procedures to digital platforms – and these carry emotional significance. A BCU staff member described how the logistical side of “being global” plays out for staff like her:

“We are always working across time zones — sometimes it feels like the university never sleeps. You’re part of this machine that’s bigger than you. But when a student comes up and says, ‘Thank you for helping me get here,’ it feels real.” (BCU₂).

In this account, the university is experienced as a kind of 24/7 apparatus, of people and technologies ceaselessly humming in multiple time zones. The speaker feels like a cog in a global machine, an affective state of being both important and impersonal. Yet, a simple relational encounter (a student’s gratitude) suddenly crystallises the abstract global into something tangible and heartfelt. This illustrates how institutional infrastructures and human emotions intra-act. The mundane work of sending acceptance letters, organising international student travel, or replying to midnight emails materialises a sense of global community. It often induces fatigue or invisibility but it also creates moments of genuine connection that make the global feel “real.” In Barad’s terms, the logistics of globalisation are material-discursive entanglements because they assemble humans, software, policies, time-zones and feelings into a shared becoming across space and time. The global imaginary is not a distant abstraction for staff, but embodied in email threads, video calls at odd hours, calendar alerts, and the emotional highs and lows of helping students succeed. Through these

interactions, people come to experience themselves as part of a world that extends beyond the local campus.

Another participant from BCU recounted adjusting an entire event to accommodate overseas colleagues:

“We had to move everything to suit their time – it was 7am for me, but 3pm for them. That’s when you realise you’re not just working here; you’re part of something larger.” (BCU₁₃).

Practices like this show how time itself is stretched and shared in the global university. Bodies, technologies, and institutional routines are re-synchronised to enable presence across distance. In this example, an early-morning meeting enabled a transcontinental team to meet in one “moment,” however asynchronous their local clocks. Such coordination requires effort and flexibility, but it produces a palpable sense of being in common. The imaginary of the global is sustained through these acts of timing – a politics of timing that is at once practical and deeply symbolic. Indeed, the temporal is as critical as the spatial in feeling “global”. By syncing one’s day with colleagues across the world, the university enacts a post-local rhythm where here and elsewhere merge in a shared now. The affect generated is “something larger” and is part of the reward (and sometimes, the compensation) for the inconveniences of temporal reconfiguration. It is in these moments of synchronisation that a distributed world community is quietly performed.

Imagined futures

Throughout the participants' narratives, the present is constantly entangled with imagined futures. There is a recurrent sense of living in a "not yet". In the research sites current efforts are always oriented toward what has yet to happen. Many found themselves speaking in the future tense even when describing present work. The participants spoke about present through not-yet-achieved dreams/objectives—"once I graduate", "when I go back home", "my family expects", "when the paper will be published", "once the promotion is formalised". The conversations were full of anticipation. Each action in the present is performed under the sign of a deferred outcome, like the degree to be earned, returning home as a success, the forthcoming publication, even desired and earned promotion. These utterances exemplify how value is deferred to the future, casting a shadow on the present. Students and staff alike often inhabit this liminal temporality. They are neither fully "here" nor certain of the future but constantly projecting themselves forward in time. "You keep thinking, after this, things will start. After this degree, life will begin," admitted another participant about the feeling of permanent postponement (UCL12). The effect is a present haunted by the future, a chronopolitics of waiting and striving.

Barad's theorisation of non-linear time helps illuminate this phenomenon. Rather than unfolding along a straight line, experiences in the global university fold past and future into the now. As Barad (2007) writes, "time is not given; it is materialised through interactions". This was clearly visible in the conversations through colonial histories, neoliberal imperatives, and familial hopes. They all intra-act in the present moment of an academic's journey. The "global" is not an elsewhere or a later, it is woven into

current becoming, as students carry family and national expectations on their shoulders and staff carry the weight of institutional legacies and targets. In other words, global imaginaries are temporal entanglements. In particular, they animate people with future-oriented drives that shape decisions in the here and now, even as those futures remain uncertain. One ARU doctoral student's narrative vividly illustrates this entanglement of personal, historical, and global timescales. She explained that

"I'm employed full-time so doing this PhD is already quite a challenge, but I've always wanted to look deeper into how people negotiate identity through language. Especially in migration contexts, or multilingual environments, because that's where you really see the complexity. How language can be both empowering and alienating. My background is in teaching English, but I also see myself as a migrant and someone who's always switching between languages, accents, and ways of being. That experience drives me. I feel like this research helps me make sense of it, but also can give something back - something that resonates with others navigating similar spaces" (ARU11)

In this account, we hear how an individual's academic trajectory is threaded into larger structures. Her present employment versus her passion points to a tension between immediate practicalities and a broader intellectual (and perhaps political) calling. Her interests in migration and multilingualism are not just personal curiosities, they are born of a world shaped by historical migrations and current global mobility imperatives. Thus, her journey is materially and affectively entangled with historical

legacies (that set the stage for today's migration patterns), with geopolitical realities of our time, and with the imagined future possibilities her research could open. The global imaginary materialises here as a driving force in her self-making, pushing her to navigate between making a living (employment) and pursuing a globally relevant research interest. It is an intra-active entanglement of biography and world. The local circumstances of her life cannot be separated from transnational currents of people and languages, and this shapes her aspirations. Another participant, from BCU, connected the university's global character to his own family history.

“My father was a chemistry professor, and universities have always been places where people from all over the world meet. This international community changes your idea of the world, and it certainly changed mine,” (BCU10).

Here, the university is depicted as a lived intersection of global flows. From childhood, this participant experienced academia as a cosmopolitan space of encounter, a contact zone where diverse cultures and ideas converged. The quote highlights how global imaginaries are also felt through affective nostalgia and inspiration. For instance, the speaker's voice carries a sense of wonder and gratitude for the worldview these international encounters imparted. His personal and professional identity was profoundly shaped by an atmosphere of global co-presence. In his case, the *“international community”* of the university isn't just an ideal. It is a formative affective atmosphere that changed how he sees the world. Past, present, and future mingle in such moments – the father's career (past), the current diverse campus (present), the participant's altered outlook and trajectory (future). The university emerges as a node

where personal histories and global movements meet, reinforcing Massey's argument that place is relationally constituted by far-flung trajectories. What we also see is how belonging and imagination intermingle. Being part of a university community that is "from all over the world" allowed this individual to imagine the world as interconnected and to imagine himself as part of that global picture.

Affective Atmospheres

The affective-infrastructure nature of the global university becomes even more apparent when looking at how institutional structures channel these temporal and emotional entanglements. For instance, ensuring a quality student experience today is tied to looming future assessments, and "*balancing staff needs and welfare is the trickiest part.*" (ARU7). Such remarks underline that the university is not a static "global actor" imposing policies from the top, but an ongoing negotiation among people, priorities, and values. It is an affective field as much as an infrastructure. The *trickiness* of balancing present well-being with future goals is a daily lived tension for those in leadership (among others), one that demands judgment, care, and sometimes difficult compromise. In short, the university can be seen as a *space of aspiration* that everyone – students, academics, managers – enters with intent to transform or be transformed.

"Universities are essentially places where someone comes to become someone else, to change for the future," (BCU4)

There is a shared understanding that a university is a place to become, for students to grow into future selves, for scholars to create new knowledge or careers. With that comes an acute awareness of time (one's future always in mind) and an emotional charge (excitement, pressure) permeating the campus atmosphere. A UCL interviewee who had just transitioned from PhD student to faculty exemplified this forward-looking, aspirational atmosphere:

“Now I’m in a position with more authority and opportunity to make an impact... it’s about inspiring students, showing them ways to thrive and succeed. I remember how uncertain I felt as a PhD student—like you’re constantly proving yourself and unsure if you’ll ever get a permanent job. So now, being on the other side, I feel a responsibility not just to teach, but to mentor, to open up those paths for others.” (UCL8)

Her words convey the affective energy of stepping into a new role that carries broader influence. The university, for her, is not just where she works, it is a generative space that enables her continual becoming – from student to teacher – and in turn empowers her to guide others. It is “always already” oriented toward the future, packed with ideals of impact and success that she now feels responsible to enact. Noticeable is also the relational aspect - “*inspiring students and showing them ways to thrive*”, suggests that the global imaginary here is not confined to individual advancement but is circulating as a collective aspiration. It is a hope that through education, a new generation will flourish in a global context.

Tim Edensor's (2012) notion of affective atmospheres is useful to describe this phenomenon. Universities generate distinctive moods and sensibilities; a buzz of collective aspiration coupled often with collective anxiety. Indeed, participants frequently spoke of anticipation and anxiety in the same breath. Anticipation of publishing that paper or landing that grant, anxiety about meeting expectations or securing one's future. These affects are not just personal whims, they are co-produced by material and immaterial interactions (Edensor, 2012). For example, the deadline on the funding call, the email from a supervisor, the silent pressure of a family's hopes, the hum of late-night library study spaces. The temporal structure of doctoral programs or promotion clocks, for example, produces an atmosphere where everyone always feels slightly behind schedule yet propelled forward. Such an atmosphere is palpable on campus - a blend of excitement, stress, hope and uncertainty that is inseparable from the global ambitions circulating in these institutions.

In sum, global imaginaries are not formulated in distant boardrooms or grand mission statements - they are also crafted in place, through relations. Across the three university sites, "global" was felt to be continuously made and remade in the negotiations between institutional demands, individual lives, and transnational flows of people and ideas. The university is less a stable entity acting on the world (or vice versa), and more an assemblage or contact zone where diverse trajectories meet and worlds are entangled. One BCU lecturer described it beautifully as a space "*where people from all over the world meet... working on things in different parts of the world.*" (BCU15). This understanding reframes the university from being a container of globalisation to a site of world-making activity. Each campus can be thought of as a

node of global co-presence, where local routines (lectures, library work, coffee breaks) are interwoven with global networks and imaginaries. Place and time here are not mere settings but active ingredients. For example, the campus is produced by relations that stretch around the world, and those relations are maintained through constant time-work and emotion-work. The entangled temporalities, affects, and materials we have discussed form the conditions of possibility for anything “global” to be felt or enacted at the university. They create an undercurrent – a charged field of practices and feelings – in which a sense of “*being part of something wider*” can take hold.

Fittingly, these entangled experiences also lay the groundwork for more collective forms of imagining and being together. In the day-to-day alignment of schedules, the sharing of aspirations and frustrations, and the material exchanges across borders, a basis is established for what Manfred Steger (2008) calls a “*sense of world community*.” We might say that through all the tensions and negotiations, academics and students are actively worlding the university. That is, continuously bringing a global world into being through their interactions. This entangled, material-affective labour of global academia creates the very conditions for collective world-making within the university. In the next subsection, *Collective Imagining and Being*, the findings delve deeper into how these conditions evolve into explicit collaborations, shared visions, and communal practices of global belonging. Here, we move from the undercurrent of entangled temporalities and affects to the more overt collective efforts of imagining and living a global university world together.

6.3 Collective Imagining and Being: Relational Community and the Fractured Global Common

One of the most pervasive affective forces expressed by participants was a sense of becoming part of something beyond oneself - a feeling of belonging to a worlded community. This is not a fixed or essentialised identity, but a dynamic, fluid co-constitution of self, others, and place. As one student described:

“When you come to uni you are with people from different backgrounds and you share stories and get to know other cultures.” (ARU12)

Here, the university was being experienced as an assemblage of trajectories - social, cultural, linguistic, and emotional, that create a textured sense of togetherness.

Affective encounters with difference, the sharing of stories, and the mundane acts of dwelling together all contribute to what Steger (2008) defines as the *global imaginary*, a sense of belonging to a world beyond the immediate, one shaped through shared narratives, challenges, and aspirations. This affective sense of global connectedness is inherently fractured - not in the sense of complete rupture, but as a condition marked by discontinuities, asymmetries, and contested meanings. These fractures emerge from the uneven distribution of resources, geopolitical hierarchies, historical exclusions, and differential access to mobility and voice. Yet it is precisely through the negotiation of these tensions and disjunctions that a collective world begins to take shape -one that is not seamless or unified, but contingent, relational, and continually in the making.

From a new materialist perspective, this belonging materialises through assemblages that include human and non-human elements, buildings, accents, digital platforms, calendars, cultural practices, institutional policies. Such assemblages co-constitute student and staff subjectivities, positioning them simultaneously as local and global actors. In this way, the university becomes a living site of *world-making*, where space is continually produced through relational encounters (Massey, 2005). The global imaginary is not an abstract backdrop but something intra-actively made in practice (Barad, 2007). It takes form through the interweaving of bodies, ideas, technologies, and texts in daily academic life. Moments of co-production of meaning when people across cultures and roles make sense of their situatedness together illustrate this process. One staff member, for example, recounted learning from students and colleagues about global differences in something as ordinary as email etiquette, and adapting local systems accordingly:

“I had never thought about how the way we write emails here could be confusing or even off-putting to others. Now we talk more openly about that.” (UCL4)

This exemplifies a micro-ethics of negotiation, a material-discursive reconfiguration of institutional habitus based on emergent understanding. Such reflexivity is a practice of *worlding* (Haraway, 2016), generating new ways of *being-with* and *knowing-with* others. In these subtle exchanges, the university cultivates a kind of global consciousness through humility and adaptation, as people learn to inhabit a shared world together.

Drawing on Steger’s (2008) notion of the global imaginary as a sense of world community, the narratives illustrate how academics, students, and professional staff

collaboratively imagine and perform a “worlded” identity that transcends geographic borders. This collective imagining is evident at ARU, where an interviewee described an intentional process of *imagining the institution globally*. The university, though “maybe not as well known,” is portrayed as an aspiring, globally relevant community where every participant, from administrators to students, is seen as part of an interconnected whole. Statements like “*We’re a university that’s maybe not as well known, but we try to be ambitious and globally relevant*” (ARU9) re woven into everyday practices. Here, the global imaginary is made tangible through shared goals, cross-border partnerships, and curricular innovations that foster a sense of belonging to a larger world community. This collective vision emerges as much from administrative decisions and internationalisation strategies as from interpersonal exchanges during conferences, classrooms, and collaborative projects. In this way, the *global university* becomes a lived experience, local practices and global aspirations are inseparable, each informing the other in daily life. This collective ethos of “*being global*” also resonates at the personal level. Several participants imagined their international education as a catalyst for change in their home contexts, highlighting how global imaginaries are locally materialised. One lecturer reflected on the prestige and opportunity tied to a UK degree in her community:

“People at home respect UK education, and if you say you studied abroad, it’s like doors just open. It makes a big difference in jobs, in how family sees you too.”

(BCU7)

Such narratives reveal another facet of the fractured global common - the global university is not only a site of shared belonging, but also a source of social capital and mobility. The imagined global here carries very concrete promises of improved status, career prospects, and family pride. This perspective adds complexity to the collective imaginary, showing how dreams of worldly belonging intertwine with personal aspirations and the politics of recognition. The global imaginary, in this sense, operates simultaneously as a horizon of inclusive community and as a currency of value in local contexts.

Meanwhile, at BCU, a different configuration of global community is taking shape through digital and distributed collaboration. A researcher described how their large international project, spread across multiple countries, builds a day-to-day sense of togetherness without physical co-presence.

“We have a common base online, a safe space where we put all the data and work in real time,” (BCU5)

they explained, underscoring that *place* for them is constituted through technology and shared practice rather than geography. The reliance on digital platforms and virtual workspaces, this “common base online”, illustrates how even solitary tasks (like data analysis or writing) are imbued with a collective, distributed sense of community. These tools become arenas where diverse actors (human and non-human) engage in ongoing dialogue, reinforcing a shared identity and purpose. The “safe space” of a cloud drive or collaborative platform symbolises more than a technical resource, it embodies a networked community that sustains global belonging. Even when

individual roles appear isolated, the fabric of digital infrastructure and institutional practice binds researchers into a wider academic world, constantly negotiating what it means to be part of *the global university*. Here we see how material infrastructures like the platforms, data repositories, communication tools all intra-act with human efforts (Barad, 2007) to produce feelings of co-presence and mutual accountability. Belonging is enacted through shared rhythms (like synchronised meetings across time zones), affective connections (the trust of remote teammates), and the habit of *working together apart*. These everyday moments of exchanging drafts, troubleshooting across different time zones, and collectively navigating research challenges become the material ground of a shared imaginary. Being “in the world” together is actively composed and recomposed through each email thread, Zoom call, and collaborative document.

Using Barad’s (2007) diffractive lens to read across the ARU, BCU, UCL narratives, we can appreciate how different configurations of practice produce *different, yet connected*, global imaginaries. ARU’s imaginary feels aspirational and institution-centered (seeking global relevance from the periphery), whereas BCU’s emerges through the infrastructures and interdependencies of transnational research life. All enact a politics of belonging to a global academic commons, differently realised but underpinned by a shared impulse to be part of something beyond the here-and-now. In both cases, the global imaginary lives in the gritty details of meetings, platforms, policies, and personal commitments. Across these narratives we see that the “global” is produced through what we might call *time-work*, *value-work*, and *place-work* - synchronising activities across multiple time zones and institutional cycles, embedding

global ideals (like intercultural understanding or sustainability) into local value systems. They redefine the boundaries of campus, home, and online platforms as entangled sites of community. The global imaginary does not exist outside or above these practices. It is constituted through them - through the affective, administrative, and material labours that bring it into being. It takes shape through repetition, friction, resistance, and creative adaptation, becoming real in the very practices that seek to enact it.

Crucially, as Steger and James (2019) argue, globalisation's impact is not only about connectivity or economic integration, but also about the affective relations and subjective orientations that bind people across distances. In Appadurai's sense, locality (or community) is constantly produced through practice and imagination, especially in contexts of global flow. In our participants' descriptions, the *local* university space becomes infused with global reference points and emotional investments, producing a hybrid sense of place that is at once intimate and expansive. The *world* is not something "out there" but something being continuously made *in here*, through interactions that fold distant elsewhere into the present moment of campus life.

[Activism, Contestation, and Worlding the University Commons](#)

The production of global imaginaries within the university also brings tension. Participants across all institutions vividly articulated how activism and contestation are central to collectively imagining alternative global futures. These acts of resistance and advocacy are more than reactions to imposed conditions, because they are

proactive engagements in world-making. These are efforts to reshape what the university could be in a global context. In other words, activism itself becomes a form of collective imagining, through which academics and students “world” the university differently by challenging the status quo (Haraway, 2016).

At UCL, for example, staff member described their involvement in activism around institutional governance and economic equity, situating their struggles within broader global movements. One lecturer passionately recounted the collective fight over pension reforms and deteriorating work conditions:

“Management is really trying to take away our benefits... it’s a total disaster, we’re being squeezed.” (UCL13)

This struggle, though rooted in a UK context, is intertwined with worldwide neoliberal transformations in higher education. Yet participants spoke of it not just as a fight for their own rights, but as a re-imagining of the university as an institution grounded in fairness and collegiality. Their protests and strikes embody a global imaginary that sees universities not as isolated, profit-driven enterprises, but as part of a global commons of academia characterised by solidarity and justice. In standing together, these academics imagine the university as an ethical and publicly accountable space. This vision pushes back against competitive individualism and instead emphasises interdependence and mutual care (a sentiment resonant with Steger and James’s “normative dimension” of the global imaginary, where an ethical obligation to others is foregrounded).

Similarly, at BCU a participant emphasised activism through community engagement, seeking to bridge what they called the “massive chasm” between academia and broader society. Frustrated with academic work being trapped in ivory towers, they reflected on the importance of moving beyond “*papers in journals that no one ever reads*” and focusing on “*real world impact*” (BCU9). This perspective frames scholarly activism as an act of collective imagination as it envisions the university as a truly socially embedded institution, one that is accountable to and intertwined with the communities around it. By striving to make academic knowledge accessible and impactful, these academics are *worlding* the university as a civic space that contributes to global social progress, rather than merely producing prestige or profit. Such efforts illustrate the potential of universities to be transformative, engaged institutions. They imagine a global imaginary of academia aligned with public good, where research addresses global challenges and education empowers communities. By striving to make academic knowledge accessible and impactful, these academics are *worlding* the university as a civic space that contributes to global social progress, rather than merely producing prestige or profit. Such efforts illustrate the potential of universities to be transformative, engaged institutions. They imagine a global imaginary of academia aligned with the public good, where research addresses global challenges and education empowers communities. In doing so, they challenge the assumption that global excellence must come at the expense of local responsibilities.

Not all activism described was overt or large-scale. For instance, participants at ARU highlighted more subtle forms of contestation embedded in everyday practice. In managing a globally dispersed doctoral cohort, staff found themselves constantly

mediating between different cultural expectations and academic norms. These efforts required continual “*translation*” and “*adaptation*” (ARU8), as they navigated time zone differences, communication styles, and varying understandings of scholarly work. While less visible than a protest, such behind-the-scenes negotiation was framed as equally impactful activism - a quiet resistance to one-size-fits-all, homogenising pressures in global higher education. In these moments, staff and students collectively imagined what a more equitable global collaboration might look like, one where difference is not a problem to be erased, but a reality to be acknowledged and worked with. This everyday activism manifests as a commitment to fairness and inclusion in program policies and interactions. It shows that maintaining a truly global community in academia often means pushing back against dominant norms (for example, Anglo-centric assumptions about communication or “proper” academic behaviour) and instead co-creating new norms that honour diversity. Here, activism is woven into routine academic labour as a form of care and creativity. This can be seen as *world-making on the micro scale*, ensuring that the global imaginary of the university remains open, plural, and just.

Amid these various struggles, participants also recounted fleeting moments of relational solidarity that gave substance to a feeling of global community. These are the small, everyday encounters in which the “global common” is emotionally and practically enacted, even if only for a moment. One ARU staff member reflected on the sense of solidarity that developed in a diverse team:

“We’re all here from different places, but somehow we get each other. We’re all trying to make something work.” (ARU5)

This simple statement conveys a powerful image of a shared project - tentative, emergent, precarious - in which everyone contributes to *“make something work.”* It aligns with Steger’s (2008) conception of the global imaginary as a collective sense of being part of a world community, but importantly the kind of community described here is very situated and affective. Rather than the lofty, abstract unity one might find in official internationalisation rhetoric, what emerges in such moments is a humble, lived commons. It is a shared atmosphere forged through everyday actions - the supportive nods and knowing glances between people who do not speak the same first language, the shared laughs as well as moaning over a cup of tea, the WhatsApp group where students and lecturers from different continents trade emojis, advice, and encouragement. These interactions in form of tea breaks, collective frustrations, mutual assistance become the threads that weave a fragile but real sense of “we.” The global common here is partial and momentary, yet no less profound. It is in these micro-interactions that people actually feel what it means to be part of a global community.

Such moments of togetherness directly challenge neoliberal framings of education as a purely individualistic pursuit of credentials or competitive advantage. Instead, they suggest a return to what Massey (2005) describes as space being a *“simultaneity of stories-so-far,”* a gathering of ongoing narratives. Within the university, each person

carries their own story-so-far from different countries, backgrounds, and journeys, therefore, global community emerges through the interweaving of these trajectories. In these fragments of solidarity, the university becomes a place beyond global ambition, but of relational co-becoming. We might think of it as a fragile commons, one that is continually made and unmade in the everyday. It's fragile because it can be fractured by misunderstanding or inequity at any time, yet it's a commons because it is nurtured collectively and offers a shared sense of belonging. The diversity of perspectives and identities is precisely what sparks learning, empathy, and creative collaboration, embodying a form of global relationality grounded in respect and curiosity.

Across these narratives, activism and contestation come into view as inherently collective acts of imagination, deeply intertwined with processes of world-making. Whether in overt political struggles or in daily negotiations of difference, the members of these academic communities are actively imaging and enacting alternative ways of being-in-the-world. This collective imagination is a material-affective force that actively reshapes university spaces and cultures. Through collective actions, like a strike, a community project, a new student support initiative, or a rewritten policy previously entrenched norms are unsettled, and new possibilities emerge. Contested spaces within the university like disagreement in a department meeting, a protest on the campus or difficult cross-cultural classroom discussion become sites of creative friction. That friction, while uncomfortable, generates new ideas about how the university could engage globally with more justice and more care. We see, in effect, collective imaginaries of justice, equity, and transformation being born through praxis. The university thus comes into focus as a vibrant site of communal aspiration and

critical practice, not just a training ground for global workers or a node in global knowledge networks, but as a community that is continually re-imagining its place in the world.

In conclusion, this exploration of collective imagining and being demonstrates that global imaginaries in university life are produced through an intricate interplay of relational, affective, and material processes. Situated and embodied practices of global community formation - such as storytelling across cultures, sharing digital “safe spaces,” and caring for each other’s well-being - operate alongside material-discursive infrastructures of belonging, from social media groups and shared drives to campus events and pedagogical spaces. Acts of activism and contestation, whether loud or quiet, serve as powerful engines of imagination, pushing the boundaries of what the university’s global role means. Altogether, this reveals a globally entangled academic world where the “global” is not a distant horizon but is woven into the fabric of everyday life through interaction, aspiration, and struggle. This *fractured global common* is far from a harmonious utopia but is marked by tensions and inequalities. As Doreen Massey reminds us, space is always a product of multiplicity - of coexisting differences that do not resolve into a singular narrative but remain in tension. Yet, it is in navigating these very tensions that new forms of solidarity and understanding take shape. In the next chapter of the findings, these insights are carried forward to a broader discussion of their significance. The section immediately following synthesises these collective worlding practices and brings them into dialogue with theoretical frameworks of globalisation. It also considers the wider implications of such entangled global imaginaries for the future of the university and its place in the world.

6.4 Synthesis: The Local Making of Global Imaginaries

Synthesising across the three segments of Situated Practices and Scapes, Spatial and Temporal Dimensions, and Collective Imagining and Being, global imaginaries at ARU, BCU, and UCL emerge organically from academic life. Findings in this chapter have documented the ways in which “the global” is always in the making within these universities. It is brought into being through personal interactions, institutional routines, and material infrastructures. In other words, the global imaginary is continuously collectively co-produced on the ground, in each lecture, meeting, mentorship, and corridor conversation, rather than being something that arrives from elsewhere (or above).

Participant narratives illustrated how and why the global is produced locally in vivid, concrete ways. One BCU lecturer, for instance, described the transformation of her small campus community when international students began arriving:

“It went from being a little town with no one... to having students from all over the world... it has become an incredibly international community.” (BCU16).

Here we see global imaginaries taking shape through local change, a quiet town becomes a cosmopolitan space, and the idea of the university expands to encompass a world of backgrounds and aspirations. At ARU, academics similarly spoke of

connecting their Cambridge classrooms to learners across the Middle East and Asia via a distance-learning MBA program. What might appear as a simple technoscape-driven initiative (online teaching platforms, digital libraries) is experienced as a daily negotiation of global connectivity, lecturers juggling time zones, adapting examples for diverse cultural contexts, and feeling the presence of far-off students in the very fabric of their local work. Likewise, a UCL academic reflected on how London's urban diversity infuses campus life, noting that engaging with a truly international student body and faculty has reshaped how they teach and think about their discipline. In such moments, the university becomes a space where world-space is imagined and inhabited through locality.

These situated practices highlight Appadurai's notion of the *production of locality within global flows*. Far from being disembedded or abstract, global imaginaries are produced *in place* – through relationships and interactions that are deeply localised even as they draw in global reference points. The data show faculty and students actively reworking global flows into their local contexts, for example, BCU lecturer mentoring a student from a marginalised background into a prestigious overseas program, an ARU professor integrating examples from her international research into her teaching, a UCL group of students organising a multicultural festival on campus. Each of these acts is small-scale and place-bound, yet cumulatively they enact a sense of global belonging through the university. As one participant put it, global connection is built through “*small gestures of attention, recognition, and curiosity*” (BCU6).

Helping a classmate with a language issue, asking a question that brings in a perspective from “back home,” or sharing one's own migration story in a seminar. The

global imaginary takes root in these everyday acts, illustrating Steger and James' point that globalisation's meanings are layered onto local terrains rather than floating above them. The university thus emerges as a nodal point where global trajectories meet, aligning with Massey's idea of place as a constellation of trajectories. People, ideas, and histories converge in the university space, making it a key locale where a shared sense of being part of a wider world – a globalised world beyond borders – is continually negotiated.

Crucially, the making of global imaginaries is not only spatial but also temporal and material. Participants across the institutions talked about working through the rhythms and infrastructures that enable global engagement, often highlighting the effort and coordination involved. One BCU lecturer lamented the intense pace of the “global” university, saying, *“Some days I’m just bouncing from class to meetings to marking. By the time I get home, I’ve got nothing left in the tank.”* (BCU₁). This striking comment exposes how global academic life can compress time. It packs calendars with teaching, international benchmarking, grant writing, and more, leaving academics feeling overwhelmed. It underscores that the global imaginary is not all opportunity and expansion; it also comes with pressurised temporal regimes and affective burdens (exhaustion, anxiety) at the local level.

Another academic at ARU described juggling multiple calendars simultaneously – her own teaching schedule, university deadlines, and “trying to keep track of when people are actually available - some are on term break, others on summer hours. It’s like everyone’s on a different clock.” (ARU₂) – each operating on different timelines. These

disjunctured temporalities create friction as she navigates between local duties and the timeframes of global academia. And yet, participants also spoke of adapting to these temporal challenges as part of what makes them feel connected globally. One staff member recounted having to reschedule a meeting across continents. Here, globality is produced through temporal negotiation. Waking up early for a Zoom call with colleagues eight time zones away is more than a scheduling inconvenience; it is an embodied realisation of being enmeshed in a transnational academic network. In these moments, time and space stretch and converge, synchronising across distances to sustain a shared scholarly project. The global imaginary thus finds expression in the very experience of a day that starts before dawn, a day which, as participants noted, sometimes makes the university feel as if “it never sleeps.” The effort to synchronise with elsewhere is part of how the global is felt. Perhaps a distributed co-presence maintained through email threads, digital platforms, and the mutual adjustment of lives. In Massey’s terms, this is time-space compression lived on the personal scale, and in Barad’s terms, an intra-action of humans and non-human infrastructures (calendars, servers, smartphones) that materialises a translocal academic community. Together, these insights paint a picture of the global imaginary as an ongoing, collective practice of world-making within the university. The “global” is more than marketing slogan for these institutions, it is something that must be enacted and felt, day by day, through collaboration, negotiation, and reflexivity. Global imaginaries are *collectively produced* – emerging from encounters between people, policies, technologies, and ideas. They are spatially and temporally entangled, linking disparate actors and places into shared rhythms of labour, care, and learning. They are also *situated but not static* – rooted in

the local contexts of ARU, BCU, and UCL, yet always in motion and always evolving as new people join, new technologies arrive, and global conditions shift. In short, what has been co-created by the participants is not one singular “global vision,” but a set of shared, partial, and affect-charged constructions of what it means to be a university in the world today. Each participant carries their own position and perspective (their positionality, access, history), which *diffracts* the global imaginary in unique ways, but a common thread is the tacit sense of *being-in-the-world-together*. This sense is nurtured by the university acting as a kind of *infrastructure*, not just physical or digital infrastructure (though those are important), but a logistical, emotional, and discursive infrastructure that supports global connections. In the daily hustle of campus life and the glow of computer screens late at night, the university is the stage on which a *worldwide “we”* is rehearsed and performed.

These diffractions also invite broader insights into the meaning of the “global university.” The findings suggest that a *global university*, in addition to its international partnerships, diverse demographics, or world rankings, is its capacity to foster an environment where global imaginaries can flourish locally. In other words, the global university is *less a static title and more a living process* – a space continually constituted through relationships, practices, and values that reach beyond the local. Participants frequently expressed hope that their institutions would live up to an ideal of global engagement that is inclusive and purposeful. One UCL lecturer, for example, admitted to “*a slightly more idealistic view of what university could or should be,*” (UCL2) imagining the university as a public good and a site of critical global inquiry

rather than a mere “degree factory.” Such ideals show that the global imaginary has a normative dimension, it’s about what *ought* to be, not just what is.

In conclusion, the making of global imaginaries locally at ARU, BCU, and UCL demonstrates that universities are active agents of globalisation, producing new meanings of “global” through the practices of their people. The global imaginary here is neither purely top-down nor bottom-up. It is an emergent property of the entanglement of the local and the global, the human and the non-human, the intended and the improvised. We have seen how global belonging is cultivated through everyday acts and interactions, how time and space are stretched to accommodate a sense of shared world, and how collective worlding gives rise to a feeling of planetarily within campus confines. These findings set the stage for the next chapter, “Constituting Global University Space,” where final part of findings will delve more deeply into how such global university spaces come into being. Building on Doreen Massey’s ideas of multiplicity and relationality, the chapter explores mechanisms through which university as a space is continuously made and remade through intersecting trajectories and more-than-human entanglements. The focus shifts to the material and ecological dimensions of space-making, particularly, how architectures, geographies, technologies, and even non-human actors (from campus wildlife to digital platforms) participate in the ongoing production of global university space.

In essence, if this chapter has shown *how global imaginaries are lived and felt*, the next examines *how the university’s very spaces are constituted through those imaginaries* – as dynamic, plural, and relational spaces of encounter. Through this continued diffractive

analysis, we move from understanding the global university as an imaginary community to understanding it as a continually constructed space; one that is never neutral, always in process, and rich with the multiplicities that truly global higher education entails.

7 Findings Part III: Spatial Production in the Global University

Introduction

This chapter brings the thesis into its final analytical stage by focusing on the making of space. Building on the two preceding findings chapters, chapter 5 on "University and Other Spaces (Relational Geographies)" and chapter 6 on "Making of Global Imaginaries (Global in the Local)", chapter 7 shifts the analytic scale once again - from broader relational entanglements and the production of global imaginaries to the microprocesses through which university space itself is continuously made and remade.

The first findings chapter explored how universities are embedded within broader spatial fields, operating across multiple scales and relational geographies. The second findings chapter examined how global imaginaries are constructed and inhabited through discourses, institutional narratives, and practices that bind the "global" to specific local settings. The current chapter draws these broader relationalities into sharp focus on the daily logistics, practices, and materialities that sustain and enact the global university. It offers a view of the university as a spatial form that is actively constituted through everyday activities, from digital communications and committee work to spontaneous collaborations and infrastructural improvisations.

The rationale for this shift is twofold. First, it addresses a key theoretical concern of the thesis - to explore space not as an inert backdrop but as an ongoing, relational production, aligned with Doreen Massey's (2005) conceptualisation. Second, it

recognises that global university space is not produced solely through strategic plans, official policies, or architectural forms, but is enacted and negotiated through often overlooked practices that accumulate to shape the everyday experience and material reality of academic life.

Rather than treating infrastructures, logistical systems, and spatial forms as fixed or given, this chapter examines how they are engaged, inhabited, and adapted in practice. University spaces emerge not just through design or strategy but through the ways academics, students, and administrators interact with technologies, environments, and each other. A feedback portal, an email exchange, a corridor conversation, a shared desk, a lunchtime gathering - all contribute to making space, not just occupying it. In so doing, the chapter demonstrates that globality is woven into the fabric of the everyday, not only as an imaginary or policy objective, but as a lived, negotiated reality.

In theoretical terms, the chapter draws directly on Massey's (2005) three key propositions about space:

- that space is the product of interrelations, constituted through human and non-human interactions;
- that space is a sphere of multiplicity, where distinct trajectories coexist and intertwine;
- and that space is always in the process of being made, never closed or finished.

(p.9)

These propositions are not treated abstractly but are grounded in empirical material drawn from participant narratives and practices. In attending to these dimensions, the chapter seeks to trace the active spatialisation of the global university as it unfolds through logistics, mundane routines, infrastructural engagements, and relational encounters.

Structurally, the chapter is organised into three major sections, each corresponding to one of Massey's propositions, while also building a cumulative argument about the constitution of university space.

Relational Spaces: Interconnections and Thrown-togetherness in Academia examines how university spaces emerge from dense interrelations among people, technologies, institutions, and environments. Drawing on participant narratives about mentoring relationships, committee work, pastoral care, and digital communications, this section shows that academic spaces are constituted through the interactions, negotiations, and affective investments of their occupants. The focus is on how mundane relational practices - like offering informal advice to a student, collaborating across departmental boundaries, or adapting feedback mechanisms - actively produce the spatial character of the university. Thrown-togetherness, a key concept from Massey (2005), is explored through moments where disparate trajectories converge, revealing space as a field of ongoing encounter, negotiation, and ethical responsibility.

Multiplicity of Trajectories: Plurality and the Global-Local Weave of Academic Space turns to the heterogeneity of trajectories that animate university spaces. Participants' accounts reveal how academic identities are layered and dynamic, encompassing

multiple roles (teacher, researcher, administrator, mentor), and how personal and professional histories bring different temporalities and geographies into play. The university emerges as a site of multiplicity, where global-local entanglements are lived through collaborations with overseas colleagues, the carrying of intellectual traditions across borders, and the blending of diverse disciplinary perspectives. Multiplicity is continually produced as a constitutive feature of university space, demanding ongoing negotiation, openness, and adaptability.

Space Always in the Making: Everyday Practices and the Continuous Production of Place addresses the dynamic, processual nature of university space. Here, the focus is on how everyday practices - small adaptations, spontaneous collaborations, infrastructural improvisations - continually produce and re-produce space. Through vignettes of shared lunch routines, hot-desking adaptations, informal peer support, and even weather-induced shifts in teaching environments, the section demonstrates that university spaces are never fixed but are continually shaped and reshaped through use, relation, and material interaction. Non-human actors - such as digital platforms, feedback forms, desks, and even the weather - are shown to participate actively in space-making, highlighting a posthuman sensitivity to the distributed agency of spatial production.

Across these sections, participant narratives are not treated as transparent windows onto reality but are read diffractively through theoretical concepts, allowing for a mutual enrichment of empirical and theoretical insights. This approach reveals the

textures, frictions, and negotiations that characterise the constitution of university space, attending to the affective, material, and logistical dimensions of academic life.

In this sense, the chapter serves as a culmination of the thesis's analytical trajectory. It moves from broad relational geographies (Chapter 5) and the making of global imaginaries (Chapter 6) into the micro-level processes that materialise and sustain the global university in everyday practice. It draws together the threads of relationality, imagination, and material engagement to show how space itself is a dynamic, contested, and relationally constituted phenomenon at the heart of global higher education.

In tracing these processes, the chapter also points towards the ethical and political dimensions of space-making. As Massey (2005) emphasises, space is not just a set of relations but a site of potential openness, negotiation, and change. By attending to the microprocesses of spatial production, this chapter reveals the possibilities and challenges inherent in everyday academic life. Particularly, the potential for building more inclusive, dynamic, and interconnected spaces, as well as the risks of closure, exclusion, and marginalisation. Through this detailed examination of everyday space-making, the chapter invites a rethinking of the global university as an ongoing, relational, and material achievement, continuously enacted through the practices, relations, and materialities of those who inhabit and engage it.

7.1 Relational Spaces: Interconnections and Thrown-togetherness in Everyday

Academia

The production of global university space cannot be understood without attention to the dense web of interconnections that animate its everyday life. Putting to work Massey's (2005) concept of space as the product of interrelations, this section explores how academic spaces emerge through daily relational practices among people, technologies, institutions, and environments. These relations constitute the university's spatial fabric. Through mentoring relationships, collaborations, committee work, infrastructural interactions, and moments of pastoral care, university members bring into being the university as a global, interconnected space. This section engages empirical material to illuminate the microprocesses through which such relations unfold, weaving together human and non-human agencies, and demonstrating how thrown-togetherness - the convergence of diverse trajectories - is lived and negotiated in academic contexts.

To begin with, relations among colleagues and peers knit the university space together, often in informally networked ways that flatten traditional hierarchies. One doctoral student marveled at the collegial culture of their department, noting

"There doesn't seem to be too much hierarchy... you can have a full conversation for an hour with someone you've never met before [in the faculty]". (BCU14)

In daily practice, this open-door ethos meant that a PhD student felt comfortable approaching senior academics at seminars or lunches, and that faculty actively

engaged junior scholars in dialogue. The elementary act of conversation over a pre-seminar lunch or coffee can thus become a spatial practice of inclusion.

“There’s a pre-seminar lunch with five faculty members you’ve probably never met before... they all just want to talk to you and learn about what you’re doing” (BCU14).

Such rituals of networking actively produce space as collegial and collaborative. In Massey’s (2005) sense, the department’s space is constituted by these interrelations, as each new conversation threaded a connection between trajectories (the PhD student’s research and the faculty’s interests) and thereby wove the wider fabric of the academic community. The absence of rigid hierarchy in these interactions also highlights how power is negotiated spatially. By choosing responsiveness and curiosity, faculty and students co-created a space of mutual development rather than top-down authority. This responsive relational practice ensured that the university remained an “open space” of interaction, aligning with Massey’s argument that openness to outside connections (here, between people of different status and expertise) gives a place its “global sense” (Massey, 2005, p. 156).

Everyday Academic Relations: Teaching, Mentoring, and Pastoral Care

One of the most immediate forms of spatial relationality in universities is the pedagogical relationship between academics and students. Participants frequently described how teaching was more than delivery of content, it was the creation of

relational spaces where trust, care, and mutual learning could occur. A lecturer at UCL reflected:

“From the moment I enter the class I define it as a safe space... I tell them that everyone’s voice matters, and that no one will be mocked or silenced” (UCL1).

Here, the classroom was produced as a relational space through explicit discursive and affective labour. The educator actively set conditions for interaction, constructing a temporary place where diverse trajectories - students’ backgrounds, experiences, and knowledges - could converge and engage. This was a practical enactment of Massey’s (2005) notion of space as relationally constituted. It was the coming together of diverse subjectivities, mediated through norms of respect and engagement, that made the classroom what it was. By opening each course with a discussion of respect and boundaries, this educator actively created an interpersonal environment where students feel secure to participate. His brief speech at the start of term formed an ordinary ritual which resulted in a small but potent spatial practice. The educator’s rule-setting and the students’ acceptance together produced a microcosm of inclusive academic space. A classroom’s sense of place, in this view, emerged from the relations among participants (teacher - student, student - student) and their shared expectations, rather than from any fixed identity of the room itself.

Mentoring relationships can similarly reveal how academic spaces are shaped by interpersonal connections that stretch across institutional structures. Another participant described how guiding a student through a career change from politics to art entailed informal communications, emotional support, and careful advice, culminating in the student's successful admission to a prestigious art school:

“She texted me just before the interview started: ‘I got in, thank you so much.’ It was emotional... that was one of the moments I felt I was really doing something important” (UCL1).

This vignette underscores the spatial relationality of academia. The university in addition to being a site of formal learning is also a place where life trajectories are reoriented through relational engagements. The mentor's responsiveness and willingness to engage beyond disciplinary boundaries exemplifies how new spatial possibilities are opened through everyday encounters. The classroom, the office, and even digital platforms (texts, emails) become interwoven in producing the relational spaces of academic life. The classroom is a meeting-ground of distinct trajectories. The life experiences and perspectives of people born decades apart and hailing from diverse backgrounds come together and affect one another. This close generational resonance enabled the lecturer to mentor students not just as an authority figure but as a near-peer guide. Through a close and established bond the academic was able to recognise

and advise a student who was unhappy in her politics degree to pursue her passion in art. The mentorship transcended the formal role (*“I’m not their friend, but I’m there to guide them”*) to forge a supportive academic relationship that linked the university’s politics department with an art institution abroad, via the student’s trajectory. Each relational intervention, whether establishing a safe classroom or mentoring across disciplines, contributes to making the university a space of connection, care, and possibility.

Such relational practices can extend into pastoral care, where academics take on roles that support students’ emotional wellbeing alongside their intellectual development. A participant responsible for overseeing postgraduate student experience described their role as navigating between formal academic structures and the informal needs of students:

“It’s not just about the curriculum... it’s about creating spaces where students feel they belong, where they can connect with each other and with us” (UCL3).

Here, space was being actively made through relational labour, by organising workshops, informal meetups, and mentoring schemes that wove social and academic life together. The notion of belonging was not treated as an abstract quality but as something that must be continuously cultivated through relational practices; an idea

resonant with Massey's (2005) insistence that space is constituted through lived relations.

Academic Collaborations and Cross-Institutional Interrelations

Beyond the immediate relations of teaching and mentoring, participants described how collaborations among colleagues, within and across institutions, actively produced the university's relational spaces. Such collaborations were not simply functional; they reshaped the spaces of academic life by linking disparate trajectories and institutions.

One postdoctoral researcher in anthropology reflected on their experience of collaborative research:

"I enjoy collaborating with people I can see regularly. When I moved to UCL, one of the attractions was being able to work closely with PhD students and other postdocs, rather than working in isolation" (UCL5).

This preference for spatial proximity in collaboration - valuing the ability to encounter colleagues informally, to discuss ideas over coffee or in corridor conversations - illustrates how relational spaces were not just built through formal meetings but through everyday spatial arrangements and spontaneous encounters. The shared office spaces, departmental seminars, and communal areas became critical nodes in the university's relational topology.

Collaboration often entailed negotiation across disciplinary boundaries, adding further layers of relational complexity. A participant described their experience of working in a multidisciplinary team investigating civic education across Europe:

“My background is environmental politics, but I’m working now with people in sociology, education, and public policy... It’s challenging but also exciting, because we’re constantly having to translate concepts for each other” (ARU13).

This need for translation - linguistic, conceptual, and methodological - constitutes space as a field of relational negotiation. The university becomes a site where disciplinary trajectories intersect, sometimes uneasily, requiring continuous communicative labour to sustain collaboration. The relationality here is not frictionless as it involves effort, patience, and mutual adjustment, reinforcing Massey’s (2005) argument that space is the site of negotiation among diverse elements.

Moreover, participants frequently maintained collaborations across national and institutional borders, demonstrating how university space stretches beyond the immediate campus. One senior academic described maintaining research partnerships with colleagues from previous institutions abroad:

“Even now, I’m working with collaborators I met during my PhD and postdoc years in different countries... The emails, the calls, the shared documents—they’re part of my daily academic space” (BCU16).

Such transnational collaborations show that the university's spatiality it is enacted through digital communications, shared projects, and affective investments that span geographical distances, in contrast to solely physical campus. The global university, in this view, is the product of ongoing relational practices that stretch, connect, and sustain spatial relations across borders.

Administrative and Infrastructural Relations: Logistics as Space-Making

While teaching and research often receive more attention, participants' narratives underscored that administrative and infrastructural engagements are equally fundamental to the relational production of university space. Forms, portals, feedback mechanisms, committee meetings, workload models – in addition to being technicalities are relational practices that bind the university together.

One participant responsible for postgraduate student experience reflected:

“A big part of my role is the invisible logistics... scheduling workshops, organising mentoring programmes, responding to emails from students and colleagues... It's a constant stitching together of different parts of the university” (UCL3).

Here, administrative labour is revealed as relational stitching of continuous, often invisible labour that connected students, faculty, departments, and external bodies. Each email sent, form processed, or meeting organised was a small act of relational space-making, binding trajectories together and sustaining the fabric of university life.

Participants often highlighted how administrative systems both facilitated and constrained relational practices. For example, workload models intended to distribute tasks fairly sometimes clashed with the realities of relational labour:

“The model says 40% research, 40% teaching, 20% admin... but in practice, pastoral care, informal mentoring, emotional support, they don’t fit neatly into those categories”

(ARU13).

Another noted:

“Now [it’s] 60% research, 30% teaching and 10% (or even less) admin - but it changes all the time” (BCU 12).

These estimates portrayed the present moment as sliced into multiple parallel spaces, an hour might belong to “research space” (writing a journal article or analysing data), then next to “teaching space” (delivering a lecture or mentoring a student), and later to “admin space” (handling forms, emails, or committee work). The fact that these proportions change over time also signals that an academic’s trajectory is not static. Projects conclude or new responsibilities arise, the balance shifts. Space, therefore, is *always a simultaneity of stories-so-far* (Massey, 2005). At any given time, the university is the sum of countless ongoing storylines (each person’s mix of tasks and experiences), which meet and intersect in its halls and platforms.

The misalignment between the workload model and the actual work underscores how relational work exceeds bureaucratic classifications. Space is not produced solely through formal tasks but through the relational excess like the informal conversations, the uncounted mentoring, the emotional labour. The logistical models cannot fully capture these. This resonates with Massey's (2005) argument that space is constituted through ongoing, open-ended interrelations, not through closed, static categories.

Technological infrastructures also played a central role in shaping relational spaces. Participants described how digital systems like email platforms, feedback portals, online learning environments mediated their daily interactions, sometimes enabling new forms of connection, other times introducing distance or alienation. One lecturer noted:

"Email is the main way I keep in touch with students and colleagues... Sometimes I have days where I don't speak to anyone face-to-face, but dozens of conversations are happening over email" (BCU11).

Here, digital communication is not a supplement to "real" relationality, it is a primary mode of space-making. The rhythms of academic life. The quick email replies, the careful crafting of feedback, the scheduling of meetings are all woven through digital infrastructures, producing relational spaces that stretch beyond physical co-presence.

Yet these infrastructures also introduced new spatial frictions. A participant complained over the bureaucratic impersonality of online feedback systems:

“Students fill in forms, rate you numerically... It feels mechanical, not relational. That’s why I always try to have informal conversations with students about how the class is going” (ARU1).

In this example, the formal infrastructural space of the feedback portal is supplemented by informal, face-to-face interactions, reintroducing relationality where it is otherwise thinned out. Space is thus negotiated not only through acceptance of infrastructures but through creative adaptations and reconfigurations of them.

The interviews also reveal how the university extends into digital spaces, enabling new forms of mobility and flexibility that reconfigure what “campus” means. In an era of online teaching, remote work, and virtual collaboration, the boundaries of the university have become deeply entangled with digital platforms and personal spaces. Many participants described an academic workflow that transcends physical campus, aligning with Massey’s observation that space and time are intimately connected and dynamic. The university is as much a network of screens and servers as it is buildings and lecture halls. Teaching and collegial interaction, for example, often happen in virtual environments. A UCL staff member bluntly stated that working with colleagues on teaching “is basically almost entirely something that happens online” (UCL4). Rather than meeting in departmental corridors, faculty coordinate via Microsoft Teams chats and video calls – “the chat thing in Teams or video calls, that sort of thing” (BCU11). This shift illustrates how the spatial practice of the university has been reconfigured: the *perceived space* of daily academic work is now a hybrid of office,

home, and cloud. Co-workers may be physically dispersed across the city (or even the globe), yet digitally co-present, forming what Lefebvre would call a new mode of “spatialisation” of work. The campus intranet, the Zoom meeting, the shared Google/Microsoft document have become key sites of academic life, effectively extending the university’s space into the virtual realm. One could say the university now exists as a distributed assemblage of humans and technologies, echoing new materialist ideas of human–nonhuman *intra-action*. The participants’ experiences support this as they do not experience a tidy separation between “inside campus” and “outside world”. The digital infrastructure weaves them into a continuous workspace that blurs inside/outside (recalling Barad’s notion that boundaries are enacted, not given).

Moreover, the flexibility afforded by digital connectivity means academics physically move fluidly between spaces while still “at work”. An ARU lecturer celebrated “*the flexibility [of academia] so I can work at home*” (ARU7), noting that on a given day she can do research, answer emails, plan courses from her house, then “*go off for the afternoon and get my kids from school*”. Her account highlights how the home space and the university space have become interlaced. Opposed to a conventional 9-to-5 on campus, her academic work was decoupled from a single location or strict schedule. This illuminates time-space compression of contemporary life, where boundaries of place and time are stretched by technology. It also resonates with Cresswell’s point that places are continually made through practice. Here the home becomes a satellite of the university, as teaching and research happen in home offices, and the university in turn is reimagined as a flexible arrangement rather than a fixed locale. Another

participant, from BCU, who researches online pedagogy, illustrated how digital extension can reach new learners. Her project created “*bite size video [learning] materials*” (BCU7) to help students with no background in statistics, many of whom had joined a fully online master's programme. In doing so, she leveraged digital platforms to fold distant or non-traditional students into the university's space. These were students who may never set foot on campus but are nonetheless part of its scholarly community. The university thus unfolds across cyberspace, connecting educators and students in an interactive web that transcends geography.

In sum, the digital dimension of these academics' work produced a university that was simultaneously everywhere and anywhere. It was an assemblage that spans chat threads, virtual classrooms, and personal living rooms. This challenges any notion of the university as a bounded physical place. Instead, we see a relational geography of digital connectivity, where what matters is the flow of communication and information. Spaces merge: the “local” office meeting might include colleagues in different countries; the “classroom” might be a mosaic of webcam windows. Such fluid spatial dynamics reinforce Massey's and Lefebvre's insights that space is always in the making and that we must actively *think* space beyond physical buildings. The participants in this study were effectively co-producing a new spatial reality for the university, one that embraced mobility, multiplicity, and the collapse of distance through technology.

Non-Human Actors in Relational Space-Making: Technologies, Objects, Environments

In addition to human relations, participants' accounts revealed the vital role of non-human actors in the constitution of university space. Technologies, material objects, environmental conditions, and digital infrastructures all participated actively in shaping relational dynamics, reinforcing a post-humanist understanding of space as co-produced across human and non-human agencies. Participants frequently described how technological systems mediated and structured their relational engagements. For instance, one postdoctoral researcher explained:

“Our group’s communication is organised through a shared platform... project updates, meeting notes, draft papers—it’s all there. It’s how we stay connected, even when people are in the field or travelling” (UCL5).

Here, the shared digital platform acted as a relational infrastructure, enabling dispersed members of a research group to remain interconnected. The platform was not a neutral backdrop because it actively configured how relations were maintained, which connections were strengthened, and how information flowed. In Massey's (2005) terms, the space of the research group was constituted through this technologically mediated relationality, extending across physical and digital terrains.

Material objects also emerged as key actors in relational space-making. A participant described how desk spaces in a hot-desking environment became informally territorialised:

“Officially, desks are hot-desking, but people leave a plant or a mug to signal that it’s their’ spot. It’s understood—nobody touches it” (BCU₁₄).

In this vignette, personal objects functioned as relational markers, silently negotiating the spatial dynamics of shared offices. The presence of a mug or a plant produced a tacit relational agreement among colleagues, shaping the micro-geographies of belonging, privacy, and occupation. Such material practices illustrate that space is more than discourse and in fact is also materially relational.

Environmental conditions, too, played a role in shaping relational spaces. One participant recounted:

“It was a sunny day, everyone was restless, so I said: ‘Let’s go outside.’ We held the seminar in the park across the street... It completely changed the mood. Students opened up more, they talked differently” (BCU₉).

The weather, an often-overlooked non-human actor, prompted a spatial shift, moving learning from the formal confines of the classroom to the open, informal setting of a park. This change in setting reconfigured relational dynamics among students and between students and instructor, producing a different mode of engagement. In this sense, environmental conditions intra-act with human intentions and practices to produce new relational spaces, aligning with Massey’s (2005) emphasis on the openness and unpredictability of spatial relations.

Across these examples, it becomes clear that university spaces are co-constituted through intricate assemblages of human and non-human actors. Technologies, objects,

and environments do not merely support relational practices; they actively shape and are shaped by them. Recognising the agency of non-human actors enriches our understanding of relational space-making, highlighting the material heterogeneity of academic life.

Negotiating Difference: Ethics, Care, and Responsibility in Relational Space-Making

Relational space-making is not always smooth or harmonious. As Massey (2005) reminds us, space is the product of interrelations “*necessarily involving difference*” (p. 141). Participants’ experiences highlighted that the university was a site where differences in background, status, discipline, culture, and power had to be continually negotiated, and where ethical responsibilities arose from spatial throwntogetherness. A lecturer discussed the challenge of creating inclusive spaces for students of diverse backgrounds:

“You can’t assume everyone has the same cultural references or experiences... You have to be attentive, ask questions, adjust examples, be open to being corrected” (UCL1).

This attentiveness to difference was a relational labour that produced more inclusive academic spaces. It was not about erasing difference but about recognising and negotiating it ethically. The classroom became a space where multiplicity is not only acknowledged but actively engaged with, embodying Massey’s (2005) insistence on openness and the refusal of closure in spatial practices.

Negotiating difference also involved challenging institutional norms and practices. One participant reflected critically on the handling of sexual harassment cases within the university:

“Universities talk about equality but often fail victims... It’s up to individuals—colleagues, mentors—to create spaces of trust, where people feel safe to speak up” (ARU₂).

Here, relational space-making becomes an ethical project, demanding active work to counteract exclusions and silences. The university’s official spaces like policies and procedures may fall short, but relational spaces of trust and support can be built through everyday practices of listening, advocacy, and solidarity.

Participants also highlighted the relational complexities of navigating institutional hierarchies. A doctoral student described feeling welcomed by senior academics during informal departmental lunches:

“At lunch, professors sit with PhD students, they ask about our projects... It flattens hierarchies, makes you feel part of the academic community” (BCU₃).

Such practices produce relational spaces of belonging, where difference in status was acknowledged but not reified into rigid distance. The negotiation of difference here was subtle, enacted through the choice to sit together, to listen, to engage across roles.

Across these examples, relational space-making appears not as a neutral or inevitable process but as an ongoing ethical negotiation. The global university’s spaces are

produced through encounters with difference, and the ways in which individuals respond, listening/caring/adapting/challenging, shape the spatial and ethical character of academic life.

The preceding analysis has demonstrated how the global university's spaces are constituted through complex, multi-layered interrelations among people, technologies, objects, and environments. In these examples the interrelations were imbued with affective, ethical, and material dimensions, and they produced academic spaces that were dynamic, negotiated, and lived. Yet relational space-making is only one part of the story. If space is a sphere of multiplicity, as Massey (2005) argues, then attention must also turn to how diverse trajectories coexist, overlap, and entangle within the university. The next section of the chapter explores this multiplicity in depth, tracing the global-local weave of academic space through the intersecting paths of individuals, disciplines, histories, and futures.

7.2 Multiplicity of Trajectories: Plurality and the Global-Local Weave of Academic Space

This section addresses Massey's second proposition: "space as a sphere of multiplicity, where distinct trajectories coexist" (Massey, 2005, p.9). Space in the global university emerges as an ongoing composition of trajectories – distinct yet interwoven paths of people, ideas, and histories. Drawing on Massey's (2005) theorisation, space is understood here as a "sphere of multiplicity" where heterogenous stories and journeys

coexist and intermingle in the present. In other words, the university is a layering and plurality of “spatial narratives” and accumulated encounters that “build up a history” (Massey, 2005, p.139).

Here the findings delve into how the global university is composed of many overlapping stories, roles, and paths. They integrate the concept of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 2011), the idea of identities as fluid and unfixed. Additionally Ahmed’s (2006) notion of embodied orientations – how our past movements and cultural positionings orient us in space. Through sub-sections and rich interview vignettes, the findings examine everyday academic life, from the imprint of global pasts on personal identities, to the layering of temporal experiences, to the negotiation of multiple roles in research and teaching. Participants’ accounts reveal how an academic’s myriad responsibilities (teaching, research, administration, pastoral care, etc.) open multiple spaces at once, and how personal histories and global connections intertwine with local campus life. The “*global in the local*” emerges through these layered trajectories. Individuals bring experiences from other countries, collaborations with distant colleagues, and diverse disciplinary perspectives into the everyday life of their university. The result is a richly textured space of coexisting heterogeneity, constantly negotiated by those living it.

These narratives show theoretical imaginaries and empirical life are tightly woven: academics live out Massey’s vision of multiplicity daily, as they navigate roles and relationships that span borders and eras. Each sub-section concludes with a brief

reflection grounding these insights in practical academic life. Together, they illustrate the global-local weave of academic space – an ever-evolving tapestry of trajectories.

Academic Identities and Global Pasts

Massey (2005) emphasises that any “here and now” is a conjuncture of trajectories with their own histories. Each person has a long history of encounters that have resulted in a particular experience at the university. The path which has taken them to the existing role involves other people, other institutions and other spaces, which still exist through their trajectory. Academic identities are deeply shaped by the past as academics carry into their present roles their personal histories and journeys across events, institutions, and countries (nationally and internationally). The personal trajectories of individuals contribute to the (global) multiplicity of university space by bringing in experiences and relationships from other places and times. Individuals which make up the space always relate to the past and bring it into the present. Participants illustrated this by recounting how their past educational or professional journeys elsewhere continue to inform and populate their current work. One early-career lecturer described their path:

“I’ve been living in London for the last eight years... I started my PhD three years ago... up until that point I did my masters in the UK... my bachelors in Greece” (UCL 1).

This individual’s presence in a London university classroom carried threads from Greece (prior education and cultural background) and connections to other

institutions in the UK. In teaching and research, these threads manifest as comparative perspectives, language skills, and networks that span borders. The lecturer mentioned drawing on knowledge from their home country in examples and maintaining contacts, for instance, referencing political events in Greece to enrich class discussions on European politics.

Academics bring distant places into the campus through their experiences. A senior research fellow illustrated this connection by describing how her research interests stemmed from lived global experiences.

“Most of the research I do has some connection with my life experience... being an international student is part of my experience. I have studied in different countries... and have seen the challenges as well as the opportunities,” (ARU8)

She explained this by referring to years spent studying in China and the UK. Here we see Ahmed’s (2006) notion of embodied trajectory - her body had literally moved through multiple national spaces, and those movements oriented her perspective in the university. The academic’s current orientation, what she found worth researching, was informed by the challenges she faced as an outsider in new countries. In turn, those global experiences became a resource within the local academic space, widening the university’s horizons. Her projects on education and migration wove Chinese, British, and other contexts into the fabric of her UK institution, exemplifying how individual trajectories gave the university a “global sense of place” (Massey, 2005).

Such global imprinting of identity is common across diverse academic roles. One academic looking at social policy recounted how a local research interest expanded transnationally through networks:

“I stepped into that sort of Gypsy area [English Romani community] ... Through doing [that] work and going to conferences, I learned there’s a huge population in Eastern and Central Europe and a big network of academics ... doing this stuff for years” (ARU15)

The participant described how his early-career focus on a nearby community led him to collaborate with European scholars. Personal background initially drew him to studying working-class culture and Romani neighbourhoods in England. But as Massey (2005) suggests, place is *unbounded* – it exists in a web of relations stretching beyond. In this case, attending international conferences carried his *local* trajectory into the wider academic space. He became part of a Europe-wide conversation on Romani migration, linking his university to those “elsewhere” relations. The very “mix of interconnections to spaces beyond” the campus ended up defining his scholarly identity. What began as a local ethnographic study evolved into an international research profile, demonstrating how academic identities are not rooted in one place. Rather, they are nomadic in Braidotti’s sense – moving across borders and accruing new affiliations without losing earlier ones. This nomadic academic subjectivity resists a single origin or loyalty; as this scholar’s story shows, an academic can be simultaneously of the local and of the world.

Global pasts shape not only research trajectories but also pedagogical outlooks. Many participants described drawing on prior international experiences to enrich their

teaching. For instance, an education lecturer responsible for quality enhancement explained how he oversaw a teacher training program delivered in partnership with institutions in India and beyond.

“I used to look after a PGCE International program with a partner in India... I’ve always dealt with international students,” he noted, adding that this work gave him a *“flavour of international”* education that he found highly rewarding (BCU15).

Working across borders exposed him to different cultural expectations and learning styles, which he then brought back into improving his home institution’s courses. This back-and-forth movement aligns with Ahmed’s idea of orientation - his pedagogical orientation shifted through the experience of teaching across cultural contexts. He became attuned to diverse student needs and motivations. For example, he noticed that overseas students who *“pay a lot of money to go to university... are very focused,”* compared to some local students who felt forced into college. Such insights, born of global encounter, allowed him to adjust curricula and student support in his local setting. The global past, in effect, lives on in day-to-day practices on campus.

Academic space here is constituted by what Massey calls a “conjunction of trajectories” – the coming-together of the lecturer’s past trajectory in international education with the trajectories of his current students and colleagues. The result is a more reflexive, culturally aware academic practice embedded in the local-global weave.

The above examples show how academic identities are not narrowly forged within one institution or nation but emerge from a plurality of global pasts. Individual academics carry pieces of other places, like previous universities, home countries, field sites, into

their present space. These past trajectories actively infuse the university with global connections - former study-abroad experiences inspire research on transnational issues; early-career networks abroad lead to international collaborations; teaching experiences overseas reshape classroom approaches at home. In practical terms, recognising these global threads in academics' identities can enrich institutional culture - for example, by valorising international experience as a source of innovation in curricula and research. Academic space is thus a tapestry of elsewhere's influence, an ever-evolving composite of far-flung stories now gathered "here." The global-local weave is visible in a lecturer adjusting his methods after an encounter in India, or a researcher expanding her project due to insights gained as a foreign student. In sum, the sphere of multiplicity that is university space is vividly animated by the global pasts academics embody, lending the institution a truly *cosmopolitan* character in its everyday life.

Temporalities and Personal Trajectories

If space is a meeting of trajectories, as Massey posits, it is also inherently temporal - a convergence of "stories-so-far" (Massey, 2005) at different stages. Academic space contains layers of personal time, careers in early, mid, and late phases; individual life events and historical contexts all braided together. This section examines how temporalities both personal and institutional shape the constitution of space in the global university. Each academic brings a biographical timeline that intersects with the university's present, folding past experiences into current practices. Braidotti's

nomadic subjectivity again provides a lens. The academic self is perpetually “in becoming,” never fully fixed, because it travels through time as much as through space. Meanwhile, Ahmed’s (2007) insight that orientations have histories, that *how* we inhabit space now is conditioned by where we have been, highlights the significance of personal trajectory. The interviews reveal that academics continuously negotiate their past and future within the present moment of the university, making academic space a mosaic of multiple temporal stories.

One vivid illustration came from an early-career lecturer reflecting on her winding path into academia. Now a criminology lecturer, she initially swore off academia after her undergraduate degree in political science. “*I graduated at 22 and decided I’d never ever set foot in a classroom again – never, never,*” she admitted with a laugh (BCU5).

For years she worked outside academia, until unexpected personal circumstances altered her trajectory. Her brother fell ill, and she became his carer. After he recovered, she felt it was time to do something for herself and returned to university for a master’s degree in criminology. “*I loved it and I got asked if I’d like to apply to be a visiting lecturer,*” she recounted, describing how one twist led to another. A part-time teaching opportunity, then securing funding for a PhD, and eventually a full-time lectureship. In her story, we see the non-linearity that Massey attributes to any place. This academic “here and now” was the result of a very particular weaving of personal temporal threads, early academic success, a disillusionment phase, family responsibilities, a renewed motivation, and re-entry into academia. These twists and turns actively shaped how she occupied space as a lecturer. For instance, having come

via an unconventional route, she expressed a keen empathy for students who took breaks or alternate paths. Her office hours often became mentoring sessions on navigating non-linear careers, implicitly broadening what trajectories were acknowledged in the department's space. In practical terms, her presence challenged any notion that there is a single "normal" path in academia. This awareness she also tried to install in colleagues when discussing hiring or PhD admissions. Thus, the multiplicity of time in her personal journey contributed to a more inclusive academic space that recognised multiple temporal narratives as valid.

Temporal trajectories also connect individual academics to broader historical and institutional timescales. A mid-career researcher in an education faculty described how his personal research timeline became entangled with institutional change. Trained as a sociologist of media, he found himself working in a merged Health and Education faculty after a restructuring. *"I was employed in the health faculty, then the faculty merged with education... I kind of moved across,"* (BCU₁₄) he explained.

This merger steered his research focus in new directions out of necessity, pushing him to apply his sociological lens to education topics and even public health projects. Over the past decade at the university he had accumulated a mosaic of projects:

"Mental health of postgraduates, the rhythms of postgraduate research, grassroots computing in Europe, young people and digital media... even food poverty and holiday kitchens," (BCU₁₄)

Some of these projects were far afield from his original expertise, taken on in order to secure additional funding and fulfil the institution's priorities. Yet he also pursued others out of personal passion for sociology of media, carving out space for what mattered to him. His career thus far could be seen as a series of alternating rhythms – oscillating between institution-driven and self-driven projects. This temporal negotiation resonates with Ahmed's idea that orientations are shaped by repeated actions. He had oriented himself alternately towards institutional goals and towards his own scholarly identity, turn by turn. Over time, this pattern became part of the department's collective rhythm too. Junior colleagues now looked to him as someone who could advise on balancing the pressures of the UK's Research Excellence Framework assessment (REF cycle) with intellectual growth. In other words, his personal way of managing time and projects had subtly influenced the culture, normalising a certain ebb-and-flow approach to research. The space of the faculty was constituted by such temporal norms and narratives that individuals established through lived practice.

The intersection of different generational or career-stage trajectories further adds to the temporal depth of academic space. In one department, a senior professor nearing retirement worked alongside early-career lecturers and PhD students, all with divergent "times" in academia. A PhD student might be preoccupied with their academic beginning – training, finding their scholarly voice – while the senior professor was concerned with their legacies and institutional memory. In the interviews, these interactions often highlighted how the past lived on through

mentorship. One senior academic, reflecting on decades of experience, noted that she consciously shared historical context with younger colleagues:

“I often find myself telling my PhD students why certain policies exist – you can’t ignore the fact that we’ve got an imperial, post-colonial context...,” (ARU 5)

she said, explaining how even recruitment patterns (e.g. many students from formerly colonised countries) were rooted in history. By narrating these histories, she oriented her juniors within a larger temporal frame, helping them see their work as part of an ongoing story of the institution and of academia at large. In doing so, she enacted what Massey (2005) described as “placing the local in a global historical context”, reminding colleagues that the university’s present space was built out of trajectories stretching back generations and across continents, for example, through colonial educational links. This mentoring practice was a temporal weaving, personal recollections and historical knowledge became interlaced with the mentees’ current experiences, shaping how the next generation understood the space they inhabited.

The constitution of academic space is inseparable from the temporal multiplicity of academic lives. The everyday environment of a university department is a convergence of people at different points in time, newcomers full of fresh energy intersecting with veterans carrying institutional memory, and those in between negotiating mid-career transitions. Our participants’ stories demonstrate how personal history and temporal context infuse the space. An early-career lecturer’s non-linear journey injects empathy and flexibility into her teaching environment; a mid-career researcher’s adaptive timeline sets a model for balancing conformity and creativity under institutional time

regimes; a senior academic's decades of experience become a living archive guiding younger colleagues. In practical terms, attending to these temporal layers can improve academic life. For example, departments might purposefully create forums for cross-generational exchange, valuing the insights that arise when "trajectories meet" across time. It becomes evident that *now* in the university is always an accumulation of *then* – or as Massey (2005, p.139) puts it, any "here and now" is constituted by the successions of meetings and accumulations of weavings that came before.

By acknowledging space as a tapestry of personal and historical time, universities can better support their members; for instance, recognising, the legitimacy of oblique career paths or the importance of storytelling as a mode of knowledge transmission. Ultimately, the temporal diversity within academic space keeps it dynamic. Individuals continually bring past experiences to bear and project future goals, the space is one of *becoming*, not just being – always in the making, through time as much as through space.

Academic Role

University spaces gain their character from the plural identities and roles that individuals simultaneously inhabit. Academic role is quite unique in that it inherently multiple opposed to a fixed function. Participants described their daily work as a 'juggling of hats' (UCL2) that effectively situated them in several spaces at once. Everyday academic life involves knitting of disparate threads that together form the university's spatial drapery. Academics rarely inhabit a single role; they are teachers,

researchers, administrators, mentors, and global collaborators all at once. In Massey's sense, the space of a university is literally a meeting-up of these multiple trajectories. The teaching trajectory, the research trajectory, the service trajectory, each with its own logic and rhythm, converges in the individual academic's day.

This section examines how academics navigate this multiplicity of trajectories in practice. The concept of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 2011) is especially relevant here - academics often move intellectually and socially across established boundaries. They shift between disciplines, between classroom and community, between local and international spheres, adopting a nomadic stance to fulfill the diverse expectations of their role. Ahmed's notion of orientation also plays out - an academic might "turn" from grading papers in the morning to writing a grant in the afternoon, then pivot to an international Zoom call by evening. Each task demands a shift in orientation or an attunement to different others, whether students, referees, or collaborators. The interviews provide insight into how such negotiations are managed and what they mean for the constitution of academic space.

One participant, a senior research fellow, captured the tension and strategy of balancing multiple agendas with a vivid metaphor. He referenced actor Harrison Ford's approach to Hollywood:

"Harrison Ford used to say that when he was making films, he'd do one for Hollywood and then one for himself. So that's kind of how I do it... one paper for them and then one for me." (BCU13).

In his role, “for them” meant projects that satisfy institutional metrics (funders’ priorities, departmental REF targets), while “for me” meant research driven by personal curiosity and passion (often more theoretical or unconventional work). This conscious alternation was a form of negotiation. Instead of feeling torn apart by incompatible demands, he scheduled his efforts to serve both external expectations and internal motivations in turn. By doing so, he maintained his scholarly identity and integrity (the nomadic self that refused to be pinned to one track) while also contributing to the collective goals of his university. The space of academic work, for him, became a negotiated order where he could be at once a dutiful grant-chaser and a boundary-pushing intellectual. Notably, this practice also had spatial implications beyond his personal career. It enabled collaborations that span communities. For example, in “the sexting project” he mentioned, he teamed up with colleagues from three different universities, engaging a wider network to address a timely social issue, which was one of the “for them” projects. Meanwhile, his “for me” endeavours often involved solitary conceptual work or smaller peer communities. By oscillating between these modes, he ensured that the academic space he inhabited is plural, connected to policy-driven networks at one moment, and to niche scholarly circles at another. The richness of the university environment owes much to such individuals who traverse its multiple sub-spaces and link them together through their work patterns.

Another senior academic enumerated the span of subjects and duties under their horizon:

“I look after... business, economics, law... all of the business topics, like finance, accounting, international business, HR, operations management... and then law as well. So that is kind of a management job and admin role really that takes most of my time. But my own research is looking at the future of work... sociology of work, work and organisation studies.” (BCU9).

By coordinating multiple departments and topics, this academic’s role linked a wide array of knowledge domains, each with its own networks of people and literature, into the space of the university. At the same time, they pursued research in yet another domain, bringing in external scholarly communities and agendas (in this case, global conversations on the future of work). According to Massey (2005), space exists as the sphere of coexisting heterogeneity, and here we see that heterogeneity vividly - business school administration, legal studies, and sociological research trajectories all overlapped in this professor’s daily workspace. The multiplicity of subject matters and responsibilities effectively created “many spaces in one” – an administrative meeting, a research seminar, and a class each constituted a different *micro-space* with its own social relations and objectives, yet they were all carried by the same individual. This aligns with the idea that “without multiplicity, no space” (Massey, 2005, p.9); the university’s spatial reality is literally sustained by people engaging in diverse activities at once.

Academics negotiate multiplicity through the blending of disciplines and domains in their work. Interdisciplinarity is frequently experienced as a daily routine of having to speak multiple “languages” of academia. One postdoctoral researcher illustrated this

well, trained in mathematical biology but working in an anthropology department, he found himself straddling qualitative fieldwork and quantitative modelling.

“I’ve worked on the evolution of religious celibacy... PhD students in the group collected data in Tibetan villages, whereas I do mathematical modelling... my role is to create models and in some cases put them together with the field data and publish them in one package.” (UCL5)

In his lab meetings, he moved between listening to ethnographic accounts from colleagues and presenting equations, a cognitive and social shift that required agility. This was a form of nomadic intellectual traversal. He occupied the symbolic world of mathematics and the contextual world of anthropology in tandem. The academic space he operated in was notably hybrid – neither purely a social science space nor a natural science lab, but a collaborative milieu that had to accommodate both. To make this work, he and his colleagues engaged in constant translation and negotiation of meaning (e.g. clarifying terminology, aligning on what counts as evidence). Through these interactions, they were effectively making space for a new kind of scholarly trajectory that was at once quantitative and qualitative. The empirical “there and then” of Tibetan communities was brought into conversation with the abstract “now” of theoretical modelling. This multiplicity, when managed well, can yield innovative insights – in his case, a more robust understanding of how cultural practices like celibacy might spread or persist, backed by both narrative and numerical evidence. Institutionally, however, living at the intersection of disciplines also means negotiating

different expectations (for instance, anthropology might value single-authored monographs while biology prizes team-authored papers).

The postdoc described needing to educate his supervisors and peers about the time and rigor involved in the other approach. In doing so, he was effectively carving out a transdisciplinary space within the department, helping others learn to appreciate a multiplicity of scholarly methods. His experience underscores that the global university's space is often a crossroads of epistemic trajectories and it takes active work by individuals to bridge and blend these roads. When they succeed, the academic space becomes more than the sum of its parts, supporting research and teaching that transcend conventional boundaries.

Teaching also emerged as a domain of multiplicity, where academics negotiate diverse roles of being instructor, facilitator, assessor, pastoral mentor, and even learner. A lecturer from UCL discussed how the classroom itself was a meeting point of trajectories: not only of the students' and the teacher's, but also of different knowledge traditions. She shared a powerful classroom encounter that transformed her perspective on language and power dynamics.

"I used the word slave several times in a lecture... and a student came up to me after and just very gently said: 'We don't say slave anymore; we say enslaved people.'... I use that example a lot because if you pay attention and listen to students, they know a lot of things that we don't know and they can help us," (UCL 2)

In this moment of negotiation, the lecturer's trajectory (as an expert used to lecturing on colonial history) intersected with the student's trajectory (bringing a current socio-linguistic awareness shaped perhaps by activist and global discussions on decolonising language). The space of the lecture became one of mutual adjustment. The lecturer reoriented her approach – acknowledging the student's correction and incorporating it thereafter – and the student stepped briefly into the role of teacher. This subtle role-switch speaks to Braidotti's nomadic subject, both teacher and student stepped outside their fixed identities (the authoritative professor, the passive learner) and momentarily inhabited a different position. The academic space here was co-produced through that exchange, gaining a new trajectory (the updated practice of saying “enslaved people”) that subsequently travelled with the lecturer into future classes and with the student into their scholarly confidence. As Ahmed might describe it, an orientation shift occurred as the lecturer was now oriented toward a more reflexive, listening stance in relation to students, and the classroom space was a little less hierarchical than before.

Such examples show how negotiating multiplicity in teaching means being open to the knowledge that students (who come from myriad backgrounds) bring. Especially in globalised classrooms, a teacher often finds themselves learning about cultural sensitivities or alternative perspectives, requiring humility and adaptation. Far from undermining expertise, this kind of negotiation enriches the educational space, making it more inclusive and attuned to the “global” in the global university (in this case, awareness of global shifts in language and historical understanding).

When academics say their job “contains multitudes,” they are describing how their daily spatial existence is a combination of many fibres. The multiplicity is also social and organisational, because each role connects them with different groups (students in a classroom, researchers at a conference, administrators in meetings), so the individual becomes a node where various social worlds converge. In short, the university’s global character is not only about international students or partnerships; it is also inherent in this internal plurality, as each person’s work links to multiple elsewheres (different disciplines, communities, or times of their own career).

In summary, the global university is spatially produced through a multiplicity of trajectories and identities that are layered in every corner of academic life. Individuals simultaneously occupy multiple roles (teacher, researcher, mentor, administrator), bridging various communities and tasks. They carry with them histories and connections from other places, effectively stretching the locale to the global through personal networks and experiences. And in their daily interactions – from formal meetings to coffee breaks – they bring heterogeneity to the fore, negotiating and benefiting from the coexistence of diverse viewpoints. This inherent multiplicity means that university space can never be reduced to a single identity or bounded entity, it is, as Massey (2005) insists, *defined by its openness and plurality*. The “global” in a university is thus an internal condition in contrast to external attribute. It is a product of the many entangled trajectories that compose it at any given moment.

Through these explorations of plurality, global/local identities, temporal layers of experience, and the juggling of multiple roles, it becomes apparent that academic

space is not a finished structure but an active, ongoing production. The global university is revealed as a weave of trajectories, constantly reworked as new threads (people, ideas, histories) are interlaced and as old threads take on new configurations. In Massey's terms, space is always under construction, forever in a state of becoming rather than being. The findings here have illustrated how academics contribute to this process: by bringing the world into the university and the university out to the world, by carrying the past into the present and envisioning futures, and by embracing a nomadic flexibility in their daily practices. In doing so, they enact a space that is lively, open, and plural – a space that is always being made. This sets the stage for the next section, which delves further into the idea of space's continual (re)creation. In "Space Always Being Made," we transition from understanding the multiplicity of trajectories to examining the active processes and practices through which university space is perpetually reconstituted. The momentum of these trajectories does not cease; it propels forward, reminding us that the global university thrives as an unfinished project – one that is constantly remade through the myriad interactions of its people and the wider world to which they connect.

7.3 Space Always in the Making: Everyday Practices and the Continuous Production of Place

This thesis has attempted to reiterate that space is an ongoing product of relations and actions. As Doreen Massey famously argued, "space is always under construction... always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey, 2005,

p. 9). In the context of a global university, this means that campus environments, academic communities, and even virtual learning spaces are perpetually in the making through everyday practices. Each mundane interaction, a chance hallway conversation, an impromptu collaboration, a moment of curiosity or care, participates in (re)constituting the place of the university. The findings in this section illuminate how the micro-processes of daily academic life enact the ongoing constitution of global university space. Using rich narratives from participants, we see how space is continuously (re)produced through the throwntogetherness of diverse people sparking emergent collaborations; the restless curiosity of wandering academic minds; small acts of creativity that generate new intellectual and social spaces; and the ethic of response-ability involved in negotiating daily academic life. These themes build on the previous findings about multiplicity of trajectories and the formal constitution of university spaces, but zoom in to the lived, improvisational, and often unpredictable everyday production of place, which never stops.

In line with Massey's relational view of space and Arendt's notion that action unfolds in webs of human relationships, this section of the findings exhibits that academic space is an event – a happening – continuously made and remade through practice. Each subsection below delves into a key facet of this process, weaving theoretical insights from Massey, Barad, Haraway, Arendt, and Derrida with vivid participant vignettes. The result is a dynamic portrait of “space always in the making” within the global university.

Throwntogetherness and Emergent Collaboration

One striking aspect of everyday academic life is how it brings disparate people together in shared spaces, often yielding unexpected collaborations. Massey (2005) describes place as a “throwntogetherness” of diverse trajectories, a constellation of lives and stories that *come together* in space and must negotiate how to coexist. In a global university setting, this throwntogetherness is quite literal. Faculty, students, and staff from different countries, disciplines, and backgrounds share offices, classrooms, and online forums. These chance proximities frequently spark emergent collaboration in the shape of unplanned partnerships and collective initiatives that no single individual could have orchestrated. As Hannah Arendt (1958) observes, when people *act in concert* in the public realm, they weave new “webs of human relationships,” and unpredictable results can spring from these interactions. Our participants’ stories richly illustrate this phenomenon of space as a mingling of paths that opens possibilities for joint action.

One example comes from an associate lecturer at ARU, who recounted how an informal conversation with a colleague turned into a creative pedagogical project. In his daily teaching, he noticed many students struggling with basic academic skills, so he began brainstorming solutions.

“We came up with this brilliant idea of designing this little module, which is basically for everyone in the university – things like referencing, academic writing... and we are trying this, and I think that students will benefit from it” (ARU6).

What's important is that this initiative was not handed down by any official mandate, it emerged organically from two instructors recognising a need in their everyday work and deciding (over coffee or encounter in a corridor) to tackle it together. *"It was just a brilliant idea I had... I dedicate a lot of time of my own, just because it's a passion,"* he added, emphasising that the project grew from personal investment and collegial support rather than formal duty. Once the idea took shape, the colleagues shared it with departmental leaders, received a green light, and piloted the new module.

"Sometimes when teachers have ideas, it's always good to share them and sometimes it happens... they give the attention to them that they need and things happen" (ARU6)

This vignette exemplifies how the university space is continuously produced through such grassroots collaborations, of two trajectories thrown together (in this case, two lecturers in the same department) generated a new educational space for students. The *event* of their collaboration, to use Massey's terms, reconfigured the learning landscape of the faculty, at least for those who took the new module. It also underscores Arendt's point that action is collective and unpredictable. Neither lecturer likely knew at the start of term that they would co-create a module, but their in-person encounters and shared concern enabled something novel to emerge.

The diversity inherent in global universities can similarly lead to serendipitous partnerships. An early-career lecturer in psychology at BCU described how, soon after joining the faculty, she initiated a project with a senior colleague to support students' learning. Noticing that many of her MSc "conversion" students (who came from non-psychology backgrounds) were anxious about statistics, she voluntarily teamed up with

a colleague to develop “*bite-size video learning materials for statistics*” as supplemental resources.

“*It was my initiative,*” she said proudly, “*because I always wanted to help students that have no knowledge in statistics, or they are worried... so I designed [it] with a colleague*” (BCU7).

Here again we see throwtogetherness in action. A new hire with fresh enthusiasm crosses paths with an experienced tutor; together they craft an intervention neither could accomplish alone. Such emergent collaborations are not planned by institutional strategy; they arise from everyday interactions and observations of need. Haraway’s (2016) concept of response-ability is useful here because the lecturer and her colleague demonstrated an *ability to respond* to students’ struggles, an ethical responsiveness fostered by their close contact with students. In doing so, they co-created a new pedagogical *space* (a repository of bite-sized lessons, a kind of learning micro-space within the course). This illustrates how being “thrown-together” in the daily life of a department by sharing not just physical space but also the affective space of caring for students can yield collaborative acts that remake the educational environment.

Not all such interactions require intimate collaboration. Simply being co-present with diverse others can expand one’s horizons and lead to new knowledge creation. A postgraduate law student from India recounted how the everyday cosmopolitan mix of his course enriched his learning.

“Apart from my studies, I have an opportunity to meet people from other countries... since my area is law, it’s good that I have some global knowledge, like how law in their country works. It’s all interrelated” (ARU9).

Massey’s idea of space as *a meeting-up of trajectories* is evident here. The classroom becomes a contact zone of multiple legal cultures, where students inadvertently teach each other by sharing perspectives. The place of the university is continually (re)produced as these students exchange ideas in lunch chats, group projects, and study sessions, weaving a web of global legal knowledge. In a sense, the *throwntogetherness* of an international cohort enacts what Ulrich Beck (2006) calls a *cosmopolitan condition*. Individuals live in and through multiple places at once. The student’s story shows how even casual peer interactions contribute to the university’s identity as a “global” space of learning. The place is not global merely because of institutional branding; it is made global in practice, as everyday dialogues fold distant legal systems and experiences into the local milieu.

These narratives tell us that space is produced through encounter and interaction. Whether it’s two colleagues brainstorming a new initiative, a mentor-mentored pair teaming up to improve teaching, or a multicultural student cohort exchanging ideas, academic spaces thrive on relational events. Crucially, these events are often spontaneous and beyond any individual’s full control – aligning with Arendt’s observation that action is *boundless* and unpredictable (Arendt, 1958). New collaborations can sprout from a chance meeting (a literal *throwing together*), highlighting that the material co-presence of people (even in a digital sense) is an

enabling condition for innovation. Indeed, one professor (a senior researcher at BCU) credited “*working with some of the great colleagues*” as one of the most rewarding aspects of academia, noting that even after decades, being exposed to others’ ideas keeps him “*mentally young*” and continually sparks fresh research directions (BCU₁₂). This sentiment echoes Derrida’s notion that meaningful change and insight often arise from encountering the *other*, the people or ideas beyond ourselves that we cannot fully anticipate (Derrida, 2000). In sum, the throwntogetherness of the global university is a fertile ground for emergent collaborations, which are themselves generative of new spaces (a new course, a novel research project, a richer intercultural understanding). Everyday collegial acts thus contribute to reconstituting university space as a dynamic, shared, and ever-evolving place of togetherness.

Curiosity and the Wandering Mind

If co-presence with others creates one kind of spatial dynamism, the inner drive of curiosity provides another powerful motor for the continuous production of academic space. Universities have long been seen as sites of curious wandering – not only in the sense of scholars physically roaming libraries and campuses, but also mentally venturing beyond the path of knowledge. In everyday academic life, the mind often wanders in productive ways. A random question leads a researcher into an unfamiliar seminar; a tangential reference sends a student down a rabbit-hole of reading; a daydream about a theoretical problem suddenly crystallises into an innovative approach. Such moments of curiosity are not incidental; they are central to how new

ideas form and how academic spaces (intellectual *and* physical) reconfigure over time. Karen Barad's concept of intra-action (Barad, 2007) is relevant here: rather than a solitary ego "having" ideas, Barad would suggest that ideas emerge through interaction within a network – the researcher, their materials, the environment, all entangled. A wandering mind is often an intra-active mind, responding to stimuli and engaging with the surrounding context in open-ended ways. In this sense, curiosity-driven wandering is a practice that enacts new connections in the fabric of space. It keeps the space of inquiry open and unfinished, resonating with Derrida's notion of *différance*, in which meaning is never fixed or fully present but continually produced through processes of deferral and relational difference (Derrida, 1967). Knowledge, in this view, is always in the making, emerging through what is not yet settled rather than what is already defined. Several participants illustrated how their curiosity led them to expand the boundaries of their work and, in doing so, subtly reshaped the academic spaces they inhabited. The professor at BCU, for example, described his research trajectory as evolving through diverse interests that he pursued over time.

"My main research is small business finance and microfinance," he said, "but I'm currently quite interested in sustainable energy, sustainable finance – that could be situated anywhere within the small business context. We're looking at diaspora finance in Ghana, and... how diaspora remittances impact the local economy. So, quite a diverse area." (BCU1).

His account reveals a mind that instead of staying put in corner wanders across topics (from microfinance to sustainability to diaspora economics) and geographies. Each new interest, whether sparked by global events, student questions, or personal passion, propelled him to venture into a new project, often in a new space (both conceptual and literal, as he conducted fieldwork abroad or collaborated with international colleagues). Such intellectual roaming exemplifies the university as *space of flows* (to borrow a term from Manuel Castells) where ideas circulate and connect far-flung locales. In practical terms, when this professor followed his curiosity about diaspora finance, he could travel to Accra or engage Ghanaian scholars, thereby bringing those places into relation with his home institution. The place of the university extended through his wandering mind – it became, in Massey’s terms, a constellation of trajectories linking Cambridge, Birmingham, and Ghana through research collaboration. Curiosity here acted as a force of spatial production: it drew new lines of connection on the map of academic activity.

Another participant highlighted how working in academia often meant following one’s questions beyond the confines of any job description. A research fellow in education explained that while his primary expertise was in education and migration, he frequently found himself joining colleagues’ projects on unrelated topics simply because they piqued his interest, or because he had relevant methodological skills.

“Sometimes I do research with colleagues on topics that are not my main area... for example, I joined a study on doctoral students’ recruitment and experiences” (ARU3)

This willingness to step outside one's specialisation reflected a culture of intellectual curiosity. Academics are often encouraged (formally or informally) to be Renaissance thinkers to some degree, roaming across disciplinary boundaries. Each time this researcher "wanders" into a new project team, he helps constitute a novel space of inquiry. The group investigating doctoral student experiences likely brought together people from different fields (education, psychology, management perhaps); by adding himself to that mix, he became part of an emergent intellectual community that did not exist before. In the process, he also expanded his own network and perspective. Here we see Haraway's notion of openness to the unexpected other. The researcher allowed himself to be *surprised* by questions outside his usual scope, practicing an academic form of what Haraway (2016) might call "staying with the trouble" – staying with the discomfort of the new or unknown long enough to learn something. The *wandering mind* thus is not aimless; it is a mode of being responsive to new problems and contexts. This responsiveness continually alters the researcher's orbit and the configuration of knowledge spaces within the university.

Even teaching, an activity often bound by syllabi, can invite curiosity and improvisation. An early-career lecturer at UCL shared how, despite having a defined curriculum to cover, he remained intellectually restless and exploratory in his approach. He mentioned that he enjoys making the teaching of public policy "less boring" by introducing interactive, cross-cutting elements – an impulse born of curiosity to see how different methods might engage students better (UCL10). This led him to experiment with pedagogies and even to take on a role improving *co-curricular* programs (like policy skills workshops). By wondering "what if we taught this

differently?” or “how might students learn from doing X?”, he effectively tested new arrangements of the learning space. Some ideas stick and became part of departmental practice (e.g. a new simulation exercise in class), thereby altering the space of the classroom for future cohorts. In a subtle way, his wandering, questioning mind had spatial effects: the classroom shifted from a traditional lecture layout to an interactive workshop on a given day, the boundaries between “lecture hall” and “skills lab” blurred, and students experienced the university space in a new mode. Derrida’s concept of *play* – the play of possibilities in any structure – is relevant here (Derrida, 1978). The lecturer’s curiosity introduced play into the educational structure, keeping it flexible and evolving rather than fixed. The space of the university classroom became, through curiosity, a playful space of experimentation.

These accounts underscore that curiosity-driven practices are central to how academics come to inhabit and sustain academic space. The wandering mind is not a diversion from scholarly work; it is often the condition through which new lines of inquiry are generated and sustained. Across sites, participants frequently noted, often with laughter or a weary sigh, that such moments of intellectual drift were precisely what had kept them in academia. At a mundane, everyday level, this might take the form of a scholar attending an event with no clear instrumental aim, only to find it opening up an unexpected research trajectory:

"That was totally random. I happened to go to an event at work where there was somebody who was doing some heart monitor stress research and somebody else from the emergency services that wanted this doing. And I was bolt on." (ARU1)

Or it might look like a lab group scheduling an informal “curiosity seminar” where members share something outside their immediate research (UCL11). Such moments might appear trivial, but they accumulate to shape trajectories of research and teaching. Arendt (1971) wrote about the importance of *thinking* – the internal dialogue and reflection – as something that, while invisible, grounds our capacity to judge and act. In the university, the roaming, curious thinker is laying the groundwork for future actions (a new study, a course upgrade, a grant proposal), which will have material outcomes. In this way, the inner travels of academics prefigure changes in the outer world of the institution. The space of the university remains in flux because those within it are constantly seeking, questioning, and stretching beyond the here-and-now. And importantly, this curiosity often interweaves with the earlier theme of collaboration: one person’s wandering mind can pull others into new collaborations (“*I read this interesting piece – want to explore it together?*”), multiplying its spatial impact.

Creativity and the Formation of New Academic Spaces

Everyday academic practices can be highly creative, though not always in the artistic sense. Here, *creativity* refers to the capacity to generate something new – a practice, structure, or idea – that reconfigures the existing order. In a university, this could mean inventing a new course, establishing a research centre, devising an unconventional event, or simply approaching a routine task in a novel way. Such acts of creativity are the tangible outcomes of the curiosity and collaborations discussed above. When a spark of insight or a collective idea is actualised, it forms a new space

(literally or metaphorically) within the university. For instance, founding a cross-disciplinary seminar series creates a space (perhaps a weekly gathering in a seminar room, plus an intellectual “space” of dialogue) that did not exist before. These formations are often small-scale and emergent rather than grand institutional plans. They arise from the bottom-up, through the improvisational efforts of academics responding to immediate circumstances or aspirations. In this way, creativity operates as the mechanism by which the potential inherent in throwntogetherness and wandering minds solidifies into actual place-making. Arendt’s notion of natality – the capacity to begin anew – is relevant (Arendt, 1958). Each creative act in academia is a birth of something unforeseen into the world. Likewise, Barad (2007) would view these acts as reconfigurations of the material-discursive arrangement of the university – new phenomena that emerge from iterative intra-actions. Participants offered compelling illustrations of everyday creativity, showing how they proactively shape their environment and roles.

Consider again the associate lecturer at ARU who co-created a skills module. This was not only a collaboration but a creative intervention that altered the academic offerings of his department. Prior to his and his colleague’s initiative, there was no space in the formal curriculum for remedial skills training; students who struggled with writing or research simply had to cope or seek help informally. By inventing this module, the lecturers carved out a new pedagogical space where none existed. In practical terms, a weekly slot was scheduled, a classroom allocated, a curriculum developed – a physical and curricular space materialised because of their creativity. The participant’s pride in this creation was evident - he called it “*a brilliant idea*” and noted that “*sometimes it*

happens... things happen” when one shares ideas (ARU6). His story shows how creativity often means working beyond one’s formal duties. He invested unpaid time and enthusiasm (“time of my own... just because it’s a passion”), a common scenario in academia where creative labour often exceeds contracted roles. The result, however, was something impactful in form of an institutionalised module that would likely continue after him, helping many students. In Arendtian terms, he exercised natality by initiating a new sequence of events (Arendt, 1958). Consequently, he expanded what the university *is* (it became a place that offers academic writing support integrated into coursework, which wasn’t true before). Such everyday creativity contributes to what Massey might call the open-ended story of place – adding new chapters that keep the narrative of the university unfolding rather than concluded.

Creativity can also manifest in inventing new ways to engage and build community. A deputy dean at ARU described how he fostered collaborations with external partners and set up innovative research programs as part of his role. For example, he spearheaded a “*collaborative innovation centre*” in partnership with industry and won a large European grant that brought together universities and companies from multiple countries. While such initiatives might sound top-down, in his narrative they emerged from on-the-ground creative effort. Spotting an opportunity, rallying colleagues, writing proposals – these were all parts of his everyday work as an academic leader. By creatively linking his faculty’s strengths with external needs, he effectively formed a new *transnational space* of research (one that spanned ARU, a welding institute, partners in Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, etc., focused on Industry 5.0 technologies). This new space was both conceptual (a network for knowledge exchange) and material

(people traveling between sites, digital platforms connecting labs, etc.). It exemplified how individual ingenuity within the institution could produce *global extensions* of the university's place. Ulrich Beck's idea of a "cosmopolitan vision" (Beck, 2006) is reflected here – creative academic work increasingly weaves local and global threads together, constituting spaces that are trans-local. The Deputy Dean's efforts show that everyday creativity at higher levels (administrators who are still scholars) can yield structural innovations that redefine what "university space" encompasses (in this case, reaching far beyond campus borders). It's a reminder that *place-making* occurs at multiple scale - from a single classroom (as with the skills module) or even single MS Teams message to international project networks - and that creativity is crucial at each scale.

On a more interpersonal level, creativity often arises as academics strive to mediate constraints and possibilities. A senior lecturer in law at ARU gave an example of adapting teaching formats creatively during the COVID-19 pandemic. With social distancing in place, he had to split classes between in-person and online simultaneously, a scenario that he called "*a strange exercise*". It was extremely challenging – "*very difficult to balance... talking to students online and students in the classroom at the same time,*" he said (ARU15). In response, he and his colleagues tried various creative solutions of rotating students, using assistants to monitor chat, redesigning activities to include both groups. Not all of these experiments were successful, but collectively they represented a creative reimagining of classroom space under distress. The classroom became a hybrid space stretched across physical and virtual realms. This required rethinking pedagogical techniques and technologies on

the fly. Such improvisational creativity was repeated in universities worldwide during that time – an immense, decentralised innovation process forced by necessity. The senior lecturer’s account reveals how everyday educators became creative agents in reconstituting the learning space, ensuring continuity of education. In theoretical terms, this aligns with Barad’s view that material conditions (like a pandemic and technology) intra-act with human agency to produce new configurations (Barad, 2007). The new configuration here was the hybrid classroom and the norms that came with it (e.g. Zoom background, then an in-room student, making eye contact with a camera, etc.). While the senior lecturer admitted missing the old fully in-person dynamic, the creative adaptations nonetheless expanded the repertoire of teaching practices at the university. Many of those hybrid techniques remained useful beyond the pandemic (for example, recording lectures for remote access now is a common expectation). Thus, creativity born from crisis can have a lasting spatial legacy, the university has irreversibly also become a digital space of learning in addition to a physical one.

Lastly, everyday creativity can simply be about envisioning new social spaces in the university community. One participant recounted organising a cross-departmental informal meet-up. They created a space for emergent collaboration and friendship outside of formal meetings (this came up in conversation about how to get to know colleagues in a remote-working context). Although a small act, initiating a monthly “coffee hour” for any staff on campus that day was a creative response to the isolation many felt.

“I am one of those who comes in about two or three days a week... the office is still very quiet. You can go a full day and not see any colleagues,” (UCL6).

To counter this, he and a small group of colleagues initiated a regular coffee break. In doing so, they actively produced a new social space through which collegial relations could be sustained and reworked. Such initiatives are absent from formal evaluative frameworks, metric-driven assessment regimes or performance indicators. Yet they matter precisely because they foster departmental cohesion, open up spaces for interdisciplinary exchange, and support everyday well-being. Drawing on Derrida’s (2000) notion of hospitality - the ethical practice of welcoming others into one’s space. this modest intervention can be understood as a form of everyday creativity that made the department more liveable and interactive. The example underscores that academic space is never static, even in the absence of formal structures, individuals actively invent micro-spaces to meet ongoing needs for connection and collaboration.

In sum, everyday creativity in academia – whether pedagogical, organisational, or social – is a driving force in the continuous production of university spaces. These creative acts are often responses to gaps or challenges (perhaps missing skills module, a lack of community, or a teaching challenge). They demonstrate human agency and inventiveness working within and against structural constraints. As Haraway (2016) might frame it, academics *“make oddkin”* – forging unexpected alliances and solutions – to stay with and solve the troubles they face. Each creative resolution or innovation leaves a mark on the spatial configuration of the university in form of new courses, new centres, new formats, new traditions. These are the strands of novelty that ensure

the tapestry of place is always being re-woven. Response-ability, the ethical and mindful dimension of responding to one's context, is often intertwined with such creativity. Therefore, findings delve into it next. Before moving on, it's worth noting the cumulative effect - myriad small creative practices, over time, amount to significant transformations in how the university functions and feels. The continuous production of place is thus also a *continuous creativity*, distributed among countless actors rather than handed down from on high.

Response-ability and Everyday Spatial Negotiation

Space is made not only by grand gestures of creativity, but also by the ongoing *negotiation* of everyday life in the minute adjustments, accommodations, and responsibilities that individuals enact in relation to each other and their environment. In a global university context, everyday spatial negotiation can take many forms, from negotiating how to share physical space (from a campus bench to a multicultural city neighbourhood), negotiating schedules and presence (in-person vs remote work), or negotiating conflicting priorities and values within the academic space.

These negotiations are often framed in terms of responsibility, conventionally understood as a bounded duty or obligation assigned to an individual subject. By contrast, Haraway (2016) and Barad (2010) advance the notion of *response-ability* to signal a more relational and emergent ethic. Rather than a fixed moral burden, response-ability refers to the cultivated capacity to respond - to remain open, attentive, and accountable to others, human and nonhuman, within ongoing relational

entanglements. It emphasises attentiveness, flexibility, and situated judgment, requiring individuals to notice the demands of a particular situation and adjust their actions accordingly. In the context of place-making, response-ability is crucial because it tempers individual freedom with mutual accommodation, enabling diverse actors to co-create space together. As Massey (2005) noted, a place of throwntogetherness demands negotiation – living together requires continual responses and adaptations. Our participants’ experiences highlight how much negotiation, and responsive adjustment goes into the mundane functioning of the university, ultimately contributing to its character as a lived space.

One vivid example of spatial negotiation emerged from a senior academic who described how they actively reshaped their department’s communicative landscape to facilitate collaboration and information flow:

“I persuaded the head of department to let me build the structures in the department to allow that filtering out... so we have a whole bunch of things set up in the department. As a result, I created structures to share knowledge, like an internal website, monthly seminars and distribution of journals.” (UCL12)

This participant demonstrated a deliberate act of response-ability (Haraway, 2016; Barad, 2007). In contrast to reacting to a lack of cohesion, he took initiative to create relational infrastructures that support others. Rather than accepting the fragmented communication common in academic departments, this academic negotiated with leadership, advocated for change, and helped to build new institutional practices.

These acts may seem procedural, but they are spatially constitutive: they transformed how and where people in the department encountered ideas, colleagues, and ongoing work. By producing new modes of circulation, journals made visible, seminars convened, and internal knowledge indexed online, they reconfigured the everyday academic space as more dialogic, and collectively intelligible. Importantly, these interventions were not mandated from above, but emerged from within, reflecting a situated attentiveness to what the department needed to flourish. As Massey (2005) would argue, such changes are not merely functional; they alter the very *relations through which space is made*. The academic's actions reoriented departmental culture by fostering more frequent, horizontal, and transparent modes of exchange, whilst also helping constitute the university not just as an organisational entity, but as a *relational place* shaped by acts of care and negotiation. Barad's idea that agency is about "*enacting responsibilities*" (Barad, 2007) resonates here. The academic's agency was expressed in how he took on the responsibility to implement formal structures of knowledge sharing to increase the effectiveness of their work.

Another form of spatial negotiation is juggling where work happens in the new landscape of remote and agile working. Several participants mentioned that post-pandemic, their universities had implemented flexible policies. The research fellow at ARU (Cambridge) explained,

"We are in this kind of agile working – you can go in one or two days per week, and otherwise you can work from home. I don't have any teaching duties, so most of my work is research... there is no compulsory need for me to go to the office every day" (ARU16).

This flexibility meant he could remain living in another city (he noted he hadn't moved to Cambridge, partly due to COVID and cost) and commute rarely. While liberating, it also required negotiating access to on-site resources when needed and staying connected with colleagues virtually. *"The facilities are always online... so I just need a laptop,"* he said, implying that nearly everything – meetings, library resources, even casual chats – had some online provision. Here, the negotiation was more logistical in terms of balancing convenience with the sense of community. He had to be deliberate about when to come in (perhaps for an important meeting or to meet a collaborator visiting campus) and when to stay home to focus on writing. This individual spatial practice is part of a larger pattern that is changing the university space. If many researchers like him populate the campus only sparingly, the once-bustling offices become quieter. Indeed, the lecturer at UCL observed,

"Even now, the office is still very quiet... staff are supposed to be in 40% of the time, but that's not enforced. A lot of people would rather not be there – some live far away, they come in rarely" (UCL10).

This indicates a collective negotiation of new norms - each person, responding to their circumstances (commute length, comfort working from home, need for interaction), makes choices that in aggregate shift the spatial experience of the department. The place thus continually reconstitutes, perhaps now the hallway interactions happen only on certain days or via Teams channels. Academics show response-ability by accommodating each other's modes of working. For example, those who are often remote might ensure they are reachable digitally, and those on-site more often may

take on tasks that require physical presence, sharing results with remote colleagues. These tacit agreements and adjustments represent micro-political negotiations of space and work. In Derrida's terms, there is an element of *hospitality* and trust as the institution extends hospitality to staff to work where they are most productive, and staff in turn trust one another to fulfill duties responsibly regardless of location.

Spatial negotiation also has an explicitly ethical and political dimension in academia. One compelling narrative came from the BCU professor who recounted the "red route" story in Birmingham. He and colleagues had studied the local economic impact of a city council traffic policy, and their research findings were somewhat critical. When they attempted to publicise the results, the university leadership initially hesitated, fearing it would upset city officials while the university was seeking city support for a campus relocation.

"At the last minute they said, 'no, we're not putting this press release out... it will upset the City Council'" (BCU9)

This highlighted a conflict between academic freedom and institutional politics. The professor described how they negotiated this ultimately presenting the evidence in a public forum (a council meeting) rather than via the university press office. *"We did manage to get it out,"* he said, *"the councilors... we gave them the evidence... after 10 years, I see the same thing we claimed is happening"*. This story encapsulates a negotiation over the public space of the university – is it a space for open knowledge sharing, or constrained by financial relationships? The professor, in pushing to share the research, was exercising *response-ability to the truth and to the local community*.

He felt a responsibility to local businesses affected by the traffic policy, and to the integrity of research, and responded by finding a route to disseminate findings ethically. Meanwhile, the university management demonstrated response-ability to institutional survival, despite that being in a way that clashed with the researchers' values. This tension required careful navigation – essentially a negotiation of what the university space stands for. In the end, by finding a workaround, the academic team reaffirmed the university's role as an open forum, at least in practice. This kind of everyday ethics negotiation (Should I speak out? How do I balance my duties to different stakeholders?) is part of the lived experience of many academics, especially in global universities entwined with external partners. Each decision one way or another incrementally shapes the culture of the place. If too many such decisions lead to silence, the space may become seen as corporate and controlled; if navigated toward openness, the space retains a collegial, truth-seeking character. Thus, response-ability in the moral sense is deeply tied to the production of place because it's about what kind of space we collectively make the university to be.

Across these examples, we see academics continuously negotiating space by responding to various others like students, colleagues, technology, policies, communities, and so on. These negotiations often happen quietly, even unconsciously, but they add up to significant patterns. They require empathy, flexibility, and creativity. The teacher empathises with remote students' isolation and adapts; the researcher without local roots finds ways to integrate; the professor with controversial findings chooses a tactful platform. Such actions align with Haraway's call to "*render each other capable*" (Haraway, 2016, p. 127) – an exhortation that in practice means

adjusting our behaviours to help others flourish alongside us. The outcome of countless micro-negotiations is a university space that is cohabitable – a place where many can thrive and contribute. This is never a finished achievement; it's an ongoing process of tuning and re-tuning relationships. As Massey (2005) would note, space as a product of relations is inherently political, it involves power (who gets to be comfortable, who has to adapt more) and care. The notion of *response-ability* brings an ethical lens, suggesting that the ideal is not one of dominance but of mutual responsiveness. Each person's willingness to negotiate – whether it's a mundane compromise like rotating meeting times for different time zones, or a principled stand like advocating for academic freedom – plays a part in constituting the ethos of the place. In summary, the everyday life of a global university is full of these small acts of responsiveness and negotiation. They might not be glamorous, but they are foundational to keeping space *in the making* in a way that is liveable and meaningful for its occupants.

7.4 Synthesis: Responding to Research Questions through 'Space in the Making'

This final section of three part findings, integrates the key themes of 'space in the making' with explicit responses to research questions. Unlike the previous synthesis sections, this final part explicitly ties our findings back to the guiding questions of the study. This ensures that our rich, emergent account of the global university is directly connected to the original aims of the research, demonstrating how each question finds reflection in the data. By folding the research questions into the synthesis, it highlights

how everyday practices and relations co-produce global imaginaries and university space, setting the stage for the final discussion.

Taken together, these findings paint a rich picture of the global university as *space always in the making*. We have seen how throwntogetherness and emergent collaboration contribute the spark and relational weave that set space in motion; how curiosity and wandering minds push the edges of that space outward, preventing closure and seeding innovation; how creativity consolidates new ideas into tangible forms that redefine space; and how response-ability and negotiation ensure the space remains adaptive, ethical, and inclusive amid constant change. These everyday practices do not occur in isolation – they intertwine. For instance, a chance meeting (throwntogetherness) might trigger a curious exploration, leading to a creative project, which then demands negotiation to implement. In this way, the continuous production of place is an emergent, collective accomplishment. It aligns with and enriches the earlier findings: the *Multiplicity of Trajectories* that individuals carry into the university (previous section) provide the diverse ingredients that make throwntogetherness so generative. Meanwhile, the formal structures and policies discussed in *Constituting University Spaces* set the stage upon which these daily practices play out (and sometimes subvert or reinvent). What this section contributes is an appreciation of the process – the *how* – by which space is made and remade through practice.

Notably, these insights resonate with theoretical perspectives - Massey's relational space, always under construction, is vividly illustrated by our participants' experiences.

Arendt's emphasis on action, natality, and the web of relationships comes alive in the collaborations and new beginnings we observed. We can even witness how the chaos that space presents "is at once risk and a chance" (Derrida, p. 84), because with chaos comes the chance to change. Haraway and Barad's calls for response-ability and entangled agency are reflected in the ethical and material negotiations of daily academic work. Even Derrida's deconstructive vision – the idea that meaning (or here, the meaning of "university") is never fixed, always open to *différance* – finds ground in the endless openness of findings. There is no single essence of "global university space" to be pinned down, because, as these findings have tried to explain, it is an ongoing event of place, an assemblage of trajectories and practices that collide in the moment and disperse, to be recomposed again and again.

Addressing the Research Questions

The sections above have produced a situated, relational, and materially entangled account of how global imaginaries are enacted in the everyday life of university locales. In a post-qualitative register, however, the research questions do not operate as prompts that the findings simply "answer" at the end. They have functioned as opening and departing points - conceptual and methodological orientations that have moved with the inquiry, shaping what could be noticed, followed, and brought into relation across the chapters. As such, the findings do not close the questions down; they unfold them.

Therefore, this final section offers key summary traces of how each research question has been taken up through the empirical-material assemblages presented in Chapters 5–7. These summaries are not presented as final resolutions, but as a consolidating map of the insights that have emerged diffractively across the findings: where the questions have travelled, how they have been reworked by the data, and what they have made visible about the spatial and ontological constitution of the global university.

RQ1: *How are global imaginaries produced in the localities of universities?* The findings show that global imaginaries are co-produced locally through everyday university practices, rather than simply imported. They emerge in teaching, collaboration, and communication routines, animated by transnational flows of people, information, and ideas. Academics and students actively reshape these imaginaries through their interactions. In effect, the university acts as a nexus where international exchanges and local experiences intersect and are continually reconfigured.

RQ2: *What constitutes university space, particularly global university space?* The data reveal the university as a porous, relational assemblage rather than a bounded container. Academic space arises from the convergence of diverse trajectories – individuals bringing multiple geographies, histories, and temporalities into the institution. These dimensions overlap across both physical and digital realms. In short, the university’s space simultaneously stretches across campuses, city environments, and online networks.

RQ2a: *What is the relation between materiality, global imaginaries, and global practices and events?* Everyday infrastructures and tools (email systems, shared drives, feedback platforms, collaborative software, etc.) are not passive backdrops but active agents shaping global practice. These material and technological arrangements enable and constrain how global imaginaries unfold in routine work. In other words, the university's technological and infrastructural routines directly contribute to the lived experience of its globality.

RQ2b: *What is the relation between the global spaces of the university and other spaces?* Participants describe the university extending into wider geographies through student mobility, community engagement, and institutional outreach. This relationship is intra-active: the university shapes and is shaped by urban flows, global labor markets, national policies, and personal networks. The result is a translocal meshwork where boundaries between the university and other spaces are fluid and reciprocal, rather than one-directional.

RQ2c: *What are the distinct trajectories that coexist and create multiplicity?* The findings highlight that individuals inhabit multiple, intersecting trajectories simultaneously. For example, a faculty member may juggle international collaboration, local teaching, and family commitments; a student may navigate home, campus, and online worlds at once. These coexisting identities, roles, and schedules produce a multiplicity of logics, making the university inherently dynamic and complex

RQ2d: *What are the interrelations of human and non-human actors in this space?*

Research explored how non-human elements – digital platforms, research equipment,

buildings, timetables, institutional protocols – are deeply entangled in academic life. Digital tools and physical infrastructures structure interactions and workflows, while forms and policies shape everyday routines. Together with human actions, these material actants co-constitute the space, reflecting that technology and matter actively participate in creating the global university.

RQ2e: *What processes ensure that space is always being made?* Examples from the data emphasise the continual making of space. People constantly negotiate schedules across time zones, adapt plans to funding or policy changes, and improvise solutions under constraints. These processes of negotiation, flexibility, and contestation mean that university space is never fully settled. In short, global academic space is perpetually made and remade through everyday adjustments and collaborative problem-solving.

In summary, the findings chapters have responded to the research questions not with fixed answers but by tracing the dynamic practices, affects, and materials through which the global university is continuously assembled and lived – across all three findings chapters. This approach foregrounds the ongoing making of space and belonging, resisting simplistic binaries between global and local or between individual and institutional. Instead, the university emerges as a worlded space – an entangled assemblage of trajectories, infrastructures, and imaginaries in which globality is enacted daily. Recognising that the university's place is an ongoing achievement reframes how we think about its future and our roles within it. It also raises new questions, such as how universities might consciously foster these positive everyday

practices and remain open to the diversity of trajectories that constitute them. These questions will be explored further in the concluding chapter.

In conclusion, the global university has been enacted through dynamic constellation of relations continually brought into being through everyday human and more-than-human practices. Space is always in the making here: in the seminar brainstorm that leads to a new research network, in the professor's detour to help a student that later sparks a pedagogical tool, in the quiet agreements of colleagues figuring out how to share both office air and digital bandwidth. These micro-level findings complement the macro-level observations of previous sections, reinforcing a holistic understanding that will be vital for the thesis conclusion. They suggest that any attempt to conceptualise or improve global university spaces must account for this daily, processual nature. The power and vibrancy of such spaces lie in their openness – a constant invitation for people to *make place together*. As thesis moves forward to the broader conclusions, it carries with the key insight that the place of the university is not a backdrop for academic life but an *ongoing achievement of academic life*. This understanding opens up new questions: How might universities consciously foster these positive everyday practices? How can they remain open to the multiplicity of trajectories and acts of making that constitute them? The concluding chapter will address these questions, reflecting on how acknowledging the always-in-the-making character of space might inform the future of global higher education and our responsibilities within it.

8 Discussion Chapter: An invitation to think with Global University

This chapter shifts the thesis into a more explicitly reflective and synthetic register. It follows the three findings chapters that approached the global university from different angles: as a set of relational geographies; as a site of plural global imaginaries; and as an everyday spatial formation produced through mundane, material practices. The aim here is not to restate those chapters, but to pause with them, gather what they have set in motion, and consider what it means to think with the global university after the empirical and conceptual work has unfolded.

My interest throughout has been in inquiry driven by concepts rather than by method as procedure. This chapter therefore does not “apply” theory to findings in a linear way. Instead, it reflects on what has become possible by working with particular concepts like global imaginary and global sense of place, and what these concepts have done to the idea of the global university. Thinking, in this project, has involved reading, listening, watching, writing, creating, getting confused, forming connections, and engaging in dialogues that are not always harmonious. As we think, we become; and in becoming, we move, loop back, and sometimes undo what seemed settled.

In a conventional thesis, the discussion chapter is typically expected to interpret findings, situate them within existing literature, and move the analysis toward conceptual closure. While this project engages in some of these practices, it does so from within a post-qualitative, new materialist orientation that disturbs such linear expectations. Rather than expecting to arrive at stable knowledge, this approach seeks to “imagine and accomplish an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (Lather, 2013, p. 635).

This orientation has shaped not only the analysis, but the understanding of the research process itself. From this perspective, the discussion chapter cannot operate as a neutral or retrospective commentary layered onto an already completed study. Rather, it constitutes another generative site of inquiry - an ongoing moment of interaction in which concepts, materials, and practices continue to reconfigure one another. In this sense, the discussion does not simply reflect on the global university; it actively participates in its ongoing articulation.

Post-qualitative inquiry, as taken up here, is closely connected to notions of nomadism and becoming. Rhizoanalytic approaches (Masny, 2015) understand nomadic movement as creating new trajectories and lines of flight that enable transformation into something different, a shifting self-other. Nomadism, in this sense, is not just about physical movement but about refusing fixed territories and identities. Braidotti's (2013) concept of nomadic subjectivity pushes against essentialist accounts of identity tied to race, gender, nation or class as fixed attributes, and instead foregrounds identity as relational, contextual and always in motion. Her post-anthropocentric account of the posthuman further acknowledges blurred boundaries between humans and others (non-humans and more-than-humans). Haraway's (2006) figure of the cyborg - a hybrid of organism and machine - likewise interrupts binary divisions between human and machine, male and female, and other entrenched dualisms. These ideas have been important not only for thinking about the global university, but also for how the thesis itself is conducted and written. It has been open-ended, eventful, and oriented towards becoming rather than closure.

At the same time, the thesis has deliberately retained a recognisable structure. There is a literature review, a conceptual framework, a methodology chapter, and three findings chapters. This was a pragmatic and strategic choice to situate an experimental and conceptually demanding project within a form that will be legible to readers familiar with qualitative traditions. Within that familiar frame, each chapter has already stretched the conventions it inhabits. The literature review moved beyond cataloguing work on global higher education to unsettle how “the global” has been imagined. The conceptual framework assembled global imaginary, global sense of place as tools for rethinking global as something produced in place. The methodology chapter reframed method as an ongoing engagement with concepts, relations and materialities. The findings chapters experimented with writing that diffracts theory and empirical vignettes rather than reporting themes.

Readers arriving at this discussion chapter will therefore already have encountered a form of writing that is more layered and experimental than most social science theses. This chapter takes a slightly different angle by working with what has already been set in motion. In particular, it asks what follows if we take seriously the idea that universities enact global through their spatial relations, imaginaries and everyday practices. It also considers how this shifts the way the global university is understood, researched and governed.

Furthermore, part of the task of the chapter is to make the contributions of the thesis more explicit. Another part is to manage expectations about what this inquiry has and has not been able to offer. The thesis does not provide a taxonomy of global universities, a ranking of institutional models, or prescriptive recommendations for

policy. It does not claim to capture all forms of global engagement or to speak for all institutional contexts. Instead, it offers a set of carefully worked-through examples and conceptual moves that open up a different way of approaching global university. This chapter, accordingly, comments not only on what the thesis has done, but also on what it has intentionally not attempted to do, and why.

In that sense, the chapter is less a closing statement and, in a post-qualitative register, more an invitation to continue – or begin – thinking with the global university as an ongoing, contested and more-than-human formation, and to consider how this orientation might shift both research and practice.

Accordingly, this invitation/chapter is organised in the following sections:

From Abstraction to Entanglement: Rethinking the “Global” in Higher Education, returns to the gap identified in the literature review. It revisits how globalisation and the “global university” have been framed through rankings, competitiveness and strategic narratives, and shows how the empirical chapters have responded to that conceptual void by foregrounding spatial entanglements, relations and practices.

Plural Global Imaginaries: Decolonial and Posthumanist Extensions, builds on the findings to argue for a more distributed and ethical understanding of the global. It connects the thesis to decolonial and posthumanist debates and suggests how attention to relationality, difference and more-than-human agency might reorient how universities imagine their global roles.

Addressing Potential Misreadings and Clarifying Scope turns directly to some of the questions and hesitations that have surfaced when presenting this work. It outlines, in

simple terms, what the thesis is not and clarifies the scope and limits of its claims. In doing so, it also offers a way of translating some familiar, humanist questions into ones that a post-qualitative, spatial inquiry can productively address.

Key Contributions and an Open-Ended Invitation, summarises the main conceptual and empirical contributions in accessible language and sketches a small set of takeaways for different readers: researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Rather than concluding definitively, it offers questions and prompts that invite others to make their own cuts through the material, and to think with the global university as a concept and a practice in their own contexts.

Throughout the chapter, short questions are highlighted as a way of interrupting linear exposition and encouraging the reader to pause and think with the thesis differently. In that sense, the discussion is not only about the global university; it is also a further push with the kind of inquiry that the thesis has tried to enact.

8.1 From Abstraction to Entanglement: Rethinking the “Global” in Higher Education

Looking back from the empirical chapters, the gap outlined in Chapter 2 is easier to see. The literature review showed how the “global university” operates mostly as a legitimacy tool, built into strategies, rankings and global citizenship rhetoric, often treated as a status to be achieved or a model to aspire to. Even critical work that links this imaginary to academic capitalism and neoliberal governance tends to stay at a macro level, where universities appear as strategic actors responding to external global

forces. The university is positioned as agent of the global knowledge economy, while the spatial and material work that sustains that position is left largely unexamined.

The thesis responds to this gap by reworking how the global university is conceptualised, rather than simply adding more empirical examples to existing frames. The shift is from abstraction to entanglement, to understand how global is actually made through everyday relations, practices and infrastructures in and around universities.

One aim of the thesis structure was to shift the questions usually asked in global higher education, and to unsettle the separation between “what universities say” and “what they do.” Much of the literature critiques the language of internationalisation and global strategy documents, while treating hiring practices, timetabling, building projects or digital infrastructures as secondary implementation details. Here, these elements are read together.

A diversity-and-excellence narrative in an internationalisation strategy and a hot-desking policy in an overcrowded office are not treated as different levels of analysis. Taken together, they help to produce a global university space in which mobility is celebrated discursively but materially organised through scarcity, competition and precarity. “Global strategy” is not the cause and “practice” the effect; both are understood as spatial practices that co-constitute how globality feels and who is able to inhabit it.

? *What forms of globality become possible – and for whom – when strategy texts, office layouts, timetables and digital systems are read together as spatial practice rather than as separate domains?*

This move begins to address the conceptual gap identified in Chapter 2. The question is no longer what the global university is, but how global-university effects are produced across discursive and material registers at the same time.

From “which universities are global?” to “where is global being made?”

A second move is to redirect attention from which universities qualify as global to where, and through which relations, global is being made. Status-based accounts often privilege research-intensive, ranking-dominant institutions as the standard global universities, while casting post-92, regional, rural or non-Western universities as secondary or “not yet global.” The empirical material unsettles this hierarchy.

In one teaching-focused English university, a widening-participation initiative aimed at students from migrant and racialised communities emerged as a dense point of global entanglement. Legacies of empire, contemporary migration regimes, local labour markets, transnational family networks and digital infrastructures converged in everyday pedagogic practices through personal trajectories. By contrast, in a ranking-aspirant research-intensive university, a high-profile international partnership sometimes appeared thinly global – heavily branded but materially reduced to occasional visits and shared logos.

This contrast does not deny that status and rankings matter. Instead, it reframes global as a mode of spatial production rather than an institutional accolade. It also speaks back to global HE presumptions that implicitly centre metropolitan, Anglophone and ranking-visible universities, while overlooking institutions in rural regions, majority-world contexts or sectors outside the elite. If global is approached as the density, direction and quality of relations, rather than a privileged category, then universities absent from league tables also become central to analysis.

- ? *How is global lived in and around universities – and why are those sites so rarely centred in theories of global higher education?*
- ? *How does our understanding of the global university change when a teacher-training college in the Global South or a post-92 English university is treated as equally able to enact the global as a “world-class” metropolitan institution?*

These questions point to one of the thesis’s contributions: a conceptual language that can travel beyond the English cases and be used to re-describe institutions usually positioned at the margins of the global HE imaginary. If we approach “global” as something universities do – a mode of producing space and forging relationships – then any campus becomes a potential site of globalisation-in-action. A rural teacher’s college or a post-92 urban university can be as crucial for theorising the global as an Ivy League or Oxbridge college, once we attune to the relations that begin from and converge in those spaces. This perspective echoes Massey’s idea that global and local are not opposing scales but co-constitutive interactions. By looking for global-making in unexpected locales we de-centre the usual suspects and make room for plural “global universities.” In turn, this challenges policymakers and researchers to recognise

creativity and connection beyond the elite model. It suggests that what counts as a global contribution might emerge from the margins, and that those peripheral in rankings may in fact be pioneering new forms of world-making in higher education. This shift from “who?” to “how/where?” opens up a more inclusive and nuanced inquiry. It moves us past the simplistic question of which university is global (as if global can only be exclusive), towards examining how global relations are actively composed on the ground, in any number of institutional settings.

Rethinking the global university in terms of entanglement also carries an important message about value and evaluation in higher education. If global is something performed in relations, then much of what truly makes a university “global” might elude the metrics and rankings that currently dominate reputational assessments. Global league tables reduce a world of complex relational work to composite scores – a classic abstraction. They completely mask that those scores are built on countless interactions between human and non-human: citations (which are networks of knowledge exchange), international student enrolments (which are stories of personal mobility and adaptation), research income (often tied to international collaboration and problems of global significance). By recognising that the global university is made through actual entanglements, we reframe excellence itself as a relational achievement rather than exclusive prize. This has practical and ethical implications. It suggests that universities could pay more attention to strengthening the quality of interactions – the power geometries that determine who can travel, who is heard, who feels welcome – rather than merely chasing numerical indicators. A relational view highlights that global can deepen inequality if left unexamined, but it can also be a route to greater

equity if enacted with reflexivity (fostering two-way learning partnerships, acknowledging and compensating the often-invisible labor of cultural translation and adaptation). In short, focusing on entanglements directs our attention to the qualities of connection – respect, mutuality, sustainability – rather than the quantities of connection alone.

In the sections that follow, this ethos of entanglement will continue to guide the analysis, reframing remaining questions and implications through a relational, space-sensitive lens. Far from concluding the matter, moving from abstraction to entanglement opens up new horizons for understanding and action. It transforms the “global university” from a distant idea into a situated reality – one that we are actively a part of, and one that we have the collective capacity to re-make.

Redistributing agency: space, matter and the more-than-human

The third analytical move developed in this chapter draws on Massey’s relational understanding of space and Barad’s notion of intra-action to extend spatial analyses of universities beyond familiar metaphors of “flows” and “networks,” toward a more distributed account of agency. Existing scholarship has shown convincingly that universities are implicated in global circulations of capital, people, and ideas, and that they play an active role in the production of global space. However, the principal agents in these accounts tend to remain narrowly defined: institutional leaders, policy-makers, mobile academics, and—at an urban scale—so-called “global cities.”

This thesis foregrounds a more complex and heterogeneous configuration of actors. Through diffractive readings of mundane scenes—an online application portal that quietly disadvantages applicants with unstable internet access; a learning-management system hosted on servers across multiple countries; an air-conditioning failure that reorganises teaching during a heatwave; a visa regulation that reroutes a life course—non-human actors come into view as active participants in globalisation. Seen from this perspective, the global university is not only a social or organisational entity, but an assemblage of buildings, documents, servers, ventilation systems, algorithms, regulatory regimes, and diverse bodies, all intra-acting to shape how global academic life is lived and organised.

- ? *What becomes visible when responsibility for the global university is followed through the infrastructures, regulations, and environmental conditions that materially enact global academic relations?*
- ? *How are global inequalities in higher education produced and sustained through situated human and more-than-human relations within universities, rather than merely imposed from afar?*

Crucially, expanding the field of agency does not mean dispersing responsibility to the point of disappearance. Rather, recognising the agency of infrastructures and materials renders visible the extended chains of relation through which decisions are enacted and their effects distributed. It sharpens, rather than softens, questions of responsibility by tracing how power operates through multiple sites and mediations.

Opening the discussion chapter with this movement - from abstraction to entanglement - establishes a key pivot point for the thesis as a whole. From this

vantage point, the findings of earlier chapters can be reread not as discrete thematic segments, but as interwoven elements of a larger relational configuration. The vignettes of commuting academics, transnational digital classrooms, spatial design decisions, and personal narratives become threads in a dense tapestry of place-relational global university life.

The argument developed here is both analytical and aspirational. Grounded in relational and post-human theory (drawing on Massey, Barad, Haraway, Braidotti, St. Pierre, among others) and in the empirical moments of the study, it also pushes toward a more imaginative rethinking of what the global university might be. By foregrounding space, materiality, and everyday practice, the discussion departs from the institutional self-portraits of global that dominate branding, policy discourse, and rankings. Instead, it draws attention to how the global is woven into the local times and places of university life, how it is felt in bodies and infrastructures, negotiated in mundane routines, and continually becoming rather than simply being. In doing so, this section invites readers to hold onto complexity and to consider the university as a lively nexus of relations extending within and beyond its walls, suggesting that engaging the challenges and possibilities of higher education in an interconnected era requires sustained attentiveness to these entanglements, and perhaps a willingness to cultivate them ethically, intentionally, and imaginatively.

The vignettes developed in the findings chapters can be read here less as additional “examples” and more as prompts for further questioning. A joint degree programme that reorganises timetables, calendars and library holdings asks: what happens if internationalisation is approached first as place-making rather than as a policy label? A

“digital campus” dependent on dispersed cloud servers prompts: where is the university, if everyday teaching and assessment rely on infrastructures that are spatially distant but operationally intimate? A widening-participation partnership with local schools draws attention to how such work is routinely coded as “local outreach” rather than recognised as part of the university’s global entanglements. The reconfiguration of campus spaces during COVID-19 foregrounds another question: what does it mean to speak of a global university when a virus, ventilation systems and public health regulations are as consequential as rankings or international strategies? These readings speak back to globalisation and spatial theory more broadly. By putting global HE scholarship, globalisation theory and relational spatial thinking into conversation with an experimental, post-qualitative methodology, the thesis begins to narrow the gap between institutional ideals of the “global university” and theoretical accounts of the global.

By expanding agency to include the material and technological assemblages of the university, we gain a more entangled picture of globalisation. Spatial and digital infrastructures, legal protocols, and even nature itself become part of the story of how a university becomes (or fails to become) global. Importantly, recognising this does not mean ignoring the decision-makers. On the contrary, it complicates accountability by showing that administrators’ decisions resonate through complex chains of actors and artifacts. For instance, a policy to expand international enrolments implicates not just recruitment officers but visa systems and data servers; its success or failure may hinge on server uptime or a change in immigration law as much as staff effort.

Understanding the more-than-human entanglements at work allows for a richer

ethical and practical discussion, because it foregrounds how issues of equity and sustainability are tied to infrastructure and design, not solely to intentions. This thesis thus calls for a widening of analytical vision – a move beyond metaphorical talk of “flows” to examine the concrete, messy entanglement of people, places, technology, and matter that produces global university spaces. In doing so, it aligns with scholars like Sassen who remind us that global processes “become global” only through cumulative local interactions. The global university, seen through this lens, is not an ethereal idea but an assemblage of the human and non-human, the lofty and the mundane, all pulling together (and sometimes at odds) to continually remake what “global” means on campus.

In this sense, the global university is not only something to be critiqued but a working concept that connects these levels: a way of testing how abstract theories of globalisation can be made sensitive to the mundane, situated practices through which globality is enacted. The next section develops this reconfiguration further by situating the thesis in relation to decolonial and posthumanist conversations, and by asking what a more distributed and ethical understanding of the global might require.

8.2 Plural Global Imaginaries: Decolonial and Posthumanist Extensions

As the empirical chapters took shape, certain questions kept returning in the writing and analysis. They did not emerge abstractly from theory, but from sitting with particular moments: an outreach project framed as local yet saturated with colonial histories; a sustainability initiative whose success relied on multiple long-haul flights; a

staff member describing “global engagement” as care, while institutional documents framed it as growth and visibility. Working through these materials made it impossible to hold onto a singular imaginary, or to ignore whose visions were being centred and whose were marginalised. It also made it harder to sustain a purely human-centred account of global agency.

This section takes those tensions seriously. It extends the spatial, relational account of global university developed in the previous section by asking what it implies for power, difference and ethics. It does so by bringing the thesis into conversation with decolonial and posthumanist thought. The aim is not to overlay yet another theoretical layer, but to show how the empirical and conceptual work of the thesis invites a more distributed, plural and accountable understanding of the global university.

Beyond a dominant imagining of Global University

In mainstream higher education discourse, the “global university” is usually tied to a very particular template. The experience of this narrow band of elite universities is often treated as if it were the global condition, producing a single, dominant global imaginary.

This section steps away from that template. It does not ask whether the universities in this study match an ideal model, nor does it discuss participants’ definitions of what “global” means. Instead, it follows their described making and remaking of university spaces - through teaching, administration, collaborations and local engagements - and how, in these practices, a global sense of the university is enacted. It is through this

situated space-making that plural global imaginaries come into view, often at an angle to the dominant, elite version of the “global university.”

The thesis intervenes by foregrounding the coexistence of multiple global imaginaries within and across institutions. Participant narratives move between Birmingham, Chelmsford, Lagos, Tokyo, and online seminar rooms, and they do not construct their spatial horizon in the same way as each other. A manager whose horizon is structured by international league tables and recruitment numbers inhabits a different global imaginary to a lecturer who frames global engagement as an ethical obligation towards international students, or as a commitment to community uplift and cross-cultural learning. These are not minor variations within a single script; they are qualitatively different ways of imagining what the global university is for and who it should serve. Yet they coexist within the same institutions, documents and spaces. These imaginaries circulate in the same corridors and documents, yet they pull global university space in different directions.

Importantly, the thesis does not attempt to decide which imaginary is “more global.” Instead, it shows that what counts as the global is produced through these intersecting and sometimes conflicting trajectories. Global imaginaries are institutional, but they are also deeply individual and situated, shaped by migration histories, racialisation, professional position and everyday encounters.

? *When “global engagement” is invoked in a meeting or a strategy document, whose global imaginary is at work, and what kinds of futures does it quietly privilege or sideline?*

? *How might the global university look different if imaginaries grounded in care, reciprocity or repair were taken as seriously as those grounded in growth and prestige?*

This pluralisation directly responds to critiques that globalisation theory – and global HE in particular – has often been one-dimensional and Eurocentric. Foregrounding this plurality responds directly to critiques that globalisation theory and global HE studies have too often treated “the global” as a singular horizon, anchored in Eurocentric assumptions. It also prepares the ground for thinking about global universities as sites where multiple, sometimes incommensurable futures are being negotiated at once.

Challenging centre–periphery logics

Once the university is approached spatially, centre-periphery logic starts to look less convincing. The empirical chapters have begun to suggest that global university might be something different to the assumed elite group of institution. The global shows up in the ways spaces are organised and linked, not simply in where an institution sits in a league table.

Across the three English universities, global university was not confined to the ranking-dominant site. A post-92 university, rarely foregrounded in global HE debates, appeared densely entangled in global relations through its teaching partnerships, diaspora connections and students’ cross-border trajectories. A “world-class” research-intensive university, by contrast, encountered local planning regulations, community

opposition and infrastructure limits that slowed or reshaped its global projects. In one case, a research collaboration initiated by a newer university with partners in South Asia later travelled into practices at an older, higher-status institution – a small but telling reversal of expected flows.

If a relational spatial perspective is adopted, each university appears as a knot in multiple, shifting relations. What counts as “centre” or “periphery” depends on which of these relations are traced. A regional teaching-focused university can be intensely global in its corridors, classrooms and online systems, even if it barely registers in global rankings. A high-status university can be heavily dependent on local power grids, bus routes or housing markets that quietly constrain its global reach.

Peripheries, in this view, are not simply “over there” or “lower down” the hierarchy. They are produced through particular arrangements of space, resources and recognition: access to travel funds, whose language is taken as standard, whose journals define excellence, whose campus is plugged into which infrastructures. Scholars in under-resourced institutions may be positioned as peripheral not because their ideas travel less well, but because the spaces they occupy are less connected to dominant circuits.

At the same time, the thesis encountered what might be called generative peripheries. For instance, staff and students from underrepresented backgrounds building their own cross-border networks; informal digital groups that link academics and students across continents outside formal partnerships; local community collaborations that reshape curricula and research and then circulate these as examples elsewhere. These

practices are spatially small-scale and often low-visibility, but they are clearly part of how universities participate in world-making.

Engaging with universities spatially urges us to re-draw the map, as opposed to adding context to existing centre–periphery models. In essence, global is an effect of how particular offices, classrooms, streets, platforms and community sites are put to work and connected, rather than as a badge attached to a handful of institutions.

- ? *Think of a single space in your university, if you traced all the people, documents, technologies and histories that pass through it, what global links would become visible that are not captured in its ranking position?*
- ? *Which spaces on campus are treated as “local” or marginal, but would look central to the university’s global entanglements if their relations were mapped?*
- ? *From these entangled spaces, whose work, whose students and whose places would move into view?*

Thinking relationally connects global inequality to the concrete relations through which it is produced. By locating ourselves within these networks of people, spaces, materials, and practices, we make visible the connections and power geometries that are within our reach. This visibility opens up opportunities to rework inequalities from within everyday university life, not through broad declarations of equality, but through changing how relations are recognised, valued, and sustained.

- ? *Once you see yourself as part of these relations rather than outside them, what new responsibilities, possibilities, or shifts in agency come into view for reworking the university’s unequal global formations?*

Matter, ecology, and the posthuman global

If a new materialist lens is adopted, the global university shows up as tightly entangled with the more-than-human world. In this thesis, buildings, servers, coffee cups and weather are not background conditions but active parts of how global is made. This responds to what Clark, Szerszynski and others (2023) describe as the ecological blindness of much globalisation theory, the tendency to analyse global processes while ignoring the geophysical transformations they rest on.

If we take seriously the idea of the Anthropocene, then academic activity is also a planetary force. Universities contribute to carbon emissions through international travel, draw heavily on energy to support digital infrastructures, and generate waste through campuses and laboratories. Yet these material footprints of academic globalisation are largely absent from discussions of the global university as an idea. Global strategies routinely foreground “world-leading research on global challenges” and “real-world impact,” but rarely account for the material and ecological costs through which such impact is pursued.

In this thesis, spatial entanglement is treated as social, material and ecological at once. When a university opens a satellite campus overseas, it is not simply extending its cultural or economic reach. It is commissioning concrete and glass, triggering new flight routes, installing servers and data centres, and plugging into energy and water systems elsewhere. When a sustainability research project spans three continents and multiple conferences, it may generate important knowledge while also accumulating a substantial carbon footprint. In both cases, the university’s “global reach” is inseparable from its geophysical traces.

Recognising the university as a geophysical actor does not invalidate global research or collaboration, but it does complicate what global responsibility might mean. Global knowledge production leaves marks on the Earth. Ignoring this dimension sustains a very partial understanding of what “global” signifies in higher education.

- ? *If you mapped your university’s “global” activities – conferences, exchanges, overseas campuses – alongside the energy, travel and construction they require, how would your picture of its global reach change?*
- ? *Which global initiatives have the heaviest material footprint, and are there alternative ways of sustaining those relations that would redraw the spatial pattern of globalisation?*
- ? *If global universities are also geophysical actors, how should measures of “success” change?*

These questions sit alongside, rather than apart from, the decolonial concerns raised earlier. Decentring Western centres is one part of rethinking the global; decentring the human as the only relevant actor is another. Taken together, they push the idea of the global university toward a more accountable understanding of interconnectedness, where spatial relations always involve both human and more-than-human worlds.

- ? *Once we recognise ourselves as entangled with the materials, energies, and non-human forces that sustain the university, what new possibilities for everyday, positive change become visible?*

In summary, this section has used the empirical and conceptual resources of the thesis to move the idea of the global university in three directions. First, it has shown that

global imaginaries are plural and contested, rather than converging on a single, elite model. Second, it has argued that centre–periphery stories start to break down once universities are approached as knots of relations and practices, rather than as points on a hierarchy. Third, it has foregrounded material and ecological entanglements, treating universities as planetary as well as social actors.

Across these moves, the core claim is to engage with universities spatially – following how spaces, relations and materials come together. This is what brings the global into view. This perspective extends global HE and globalisation theory, and it situates anyone thinking with the global university within a broader ethic of relational responsibility and care, running through everyday academic practices as much as through strategic visions.

8.3 Addressing Potential Misreadings and Clarifying Scope

Before moving to the final contributions, it is important to anticipate some likely misreadings of this work and to clarify its scope. A thesis that is philosophically rich, deliberately open-ended, and conceptually oriented can easily be read through expectations formed by more conventional qualitative or policy-driven studies. This section therefore outlines what the thesis has not attempted to do, and what it offers instead.

Not a blueprint, model, or ranking device

This thesis does not propose a new formula, checklist, or index for declaring a university “global.” It does not rank institutions by degrees of “globalness”, nor does it offer a typology of global university models. One of the key arguments is that global university cannot be reduced to a specific process or status, abstracted from the spatial and material relations through which it is actually enacted. It is the totality and ongoing nature of those relations that make any institution and place global.

Therefore, the thesis offers a conceptual lens, a way of noticing how universities are entangled with global processes through space, practice and materiality. Its value lies in provoking different questions and forms of reflection, not in prescribing one-size-fits-all criteria.

~~*—Which and how is this university global?~~

→ *How is global made here, and with what consequences, for whom?*

Not abstraction for abstraction’s sake

Concepts such as spatial entanglement, relational geographies, throwntogetherness and intra-action can sound abstract or obscure, especially when they appear without their empirical anchors. In this thesis, however, theory has not been an end in itself. Each concept has been taken up because it does specific analytic work that more familiar categories could not – for example, making visible the role of non-human

actors in globalisation, or allowing multiple global imaginaries to coexist within the same institutional space rather than being flattened into a single narrative.

The writing has deliberately moved back and forth between conceptual language and concrete scenes to avoid drifting into free-floating generality. Where the discussion looks more general, it is intended as a worked abstraction – a condensation of particular campuses, offices, corridors, policies and platforms – rather than a vague gesture detached from the material.

The intent has therefore been almost the opposite of abstraction for abstraction's sake. The core claim of the thesis is that the global is made in relations, in the ongoing work of making and remaking university spaces. Strategies, rankings and reputations do not float above this; they depend on people, infrastructures, documents, bodies and technologies being put to work in particular ways. What may look like abstract concepts have been necessary to trace and name these relations systematically. They are the tools that have allowed the global to be studied in a grounded, practical way - as something produced in the everyday spatial arrangements of universities.

Clarifying “global” and “local”: if all universities can be global, what is the difference?

A predictable response to the argument that any university can be approached as global might be: if all universities are global, does the term lose its meaning? And what then distinguishes the global from the local?

The thesis does not claim that all universities are equally global in status or visibility. It proposes that all universities participate, in different ways and intensities, in global

relations. The distinction between local and global is therefore not a matter of separate categories of institution, but of how relations are configured and imagined.

Locality is a necessary condition as universities are always somewhere. The “local” refers to the situated, embodied, infrastructural conditions through which university life is lived. Global, in this framework, refers to how those local conditions are saturated with, and productive of, wider trajectories – migration paths, digital infrastructures, funding circuits, colonial histories, environmental systems.

~~*—“Is this university global or only local?”~~

→ “How do local arrangements here gather and what are the relations?”

In this sense, the global is not opposed to the local, it is one way in which local places are constituted and connected. Recognising this does not flatten differences between institutions, but offers a different way of understanding them. Like many post-theoretical approaches, this thesis unsettles the local/global binary, urging these categories to be understood as mutually constituted rather than as opposing scales.

Not a dismissal of structure, inequality, or neoliberalism

A focus on everyday practices, relations and emergent processes might be read as a softening of structural critique, as if questions of neoliberalism, capitalism or colonial legacies were pushed into the background. That is not the move here. The thesis takes seriously power-geometries, centre–periphery dynamics and long histories of inequality in higher education. These are not set aside but are the conditions through which the relations traced in the empirical chapters come into view.

What the thesis resists is the idea that naming “neoliberalism” or “global capitalism” is enough on its own.

“The particular form of globalisation which we are experiencing at the moment (neoliberal capitalist, led by multinationals, etc. etc.) is taken to be the one and only form. Objections to this particular globalisation are persistently met with the derisive riposte that ‘the world will inevitably become more interconnected’. Capitalist globalisation is equated with globalisation, tout court, a discursive manoeuvre which at a stroke obscures the possibility of seeing alternative forms. It is globalisation in this particular form which is thereby taken as being inevitable. The ‘achievement’ here is to make into the political stake an abstract spatial scale (‘the global’), and incidentally to stimulate a response which defends ‘the local’. It is, rather, the relations which mutually construct them both which need to be the object of dispute.” (Massey, 2005, p.83)

Rather than stopping at the label, the analysis asks how these structural logics are made and remade in specific places. It follows how they are enacted, negotiated and sometimes quietly refused in particular rooms, documents and encounters – for example:

- in a committee where “global employability” is mobilised to support some changes and block others;

- in a budgeting decision that favours a branded international initiative over a long-standing community partnership;
- in a mentoring conversation where global career aspirations are encouraged while structural barriers remain unspoken but present.

Global imaginaries are not treated as given frameworks with predictable effects. Nor is the project about listing which imaginaries exist or cataloguing their consequences.

The starting point has been to understand that global imaginaries are *made* – in relations, in spaces, in specific material arrangements – as opposed to acting on institutions. Once global imaginaries are grounded in real relations, it becomes possible to ask more precise questions about how they align with, reproduce or unsettle neoliberal metrics, funding regimes and colonial inheritances.

This shift in starting point matters especially for institutions usually cast as “non-global” or disadvantaged. Conventional accounts begin from what such universities *lack*: rankings, reputation, international reach. The thesis suggests pausing instead to ask:

- *What forms of globality are already being produced here, and through which concrete spaces and relations?*
- *How do these situated practices intersect with audit cultures, market logics and colonial histories?*
- *Where do alternative ways of organising global connections already exist in the margins of programmes, partnerships or buildings?*

The aim is not to deny structural inequality but to specify how it is lived and organised spatially, so that possible alternatives can be thought from there. This doctoral research is an initial step in putting inquiry in that position. Before talking about reworking inequalities or reconfiguring neoliberal effects, we need to see how they are currently held in place through everyday arrangements of rooms, timetables, platforms, funding streams and imaginaries. Beginning from dominant imaginaries of the “global university” would already position these institutions as deficient, measuring them against standards that reproduce disadvantage rather than interrogate how such hierarchies are made. This research has sought to offer new concepts and vocabularies through which their global relations can be recognised and rethought.

In that sense, the thesis does not offer a replacement story in which “structure no longer matters.” Instead, it argues that globalisation in higher education is happening in these concrete, located ways. Attending to how global imaginaries are made – rather than only naming them from afar – opens up different kinds of intervention: slowing certain processes, redirecting others, amplifying existing alternatives. Thinking with the global university like this also positions each of us inside the relations we describe. It becomes harder to imagine ourselves outside “neoliberal globalisation” and easier to see the small, situated sites where our own work contributes to, or gently disrupts, how globality is enacted in everyday university life.

Reflection

By clarifying these points, the thesis aims to hopes to minimise the chances that its arguments are misdirected or misunderstood.

Rather than asking how universities can climb higher in global rankings, the thesis encourages questions such as: what assumptions about space, value, and agency are built into those rankings? Whose labour and whose environments sustain them? Instead of taking “local outreach” and “global engagement” as separate agendas, it suggests looking at how they already fold into one another. It proposes that digital and urban infrastructures are not background to globalisation but part of how it happens. In doing so, it broadens the scope of responsibility - from a narrow focus on institutional performance to ethical, relational and ecological questions about what universities are doing in and to the world.

As the doctoral work progressed, the central questions shifted. The project did not simply move towards better answers to “what is the global university?”; it came to see that the most important work lies in keeping that question open, and in tracing how different answers are enacted in practice. Midway through, it became clear that rethinking the global university was less about arriving at a robust research conclusion and more about learning to ask better, more situated questions about how globality is being made, where, and with what consequences.

In that sense, this section is also about repositioning the reader and the researcher. Thinking with the global university in the way proposed here situates each of us inside the networks, imaginaries and material arrangements described. It becomes harder to imagine “the global university” as something out there, separate from everyday decisions about teaching, travel, hiring, partnerships or infrastructure. The hope is that, by making those entanglements more visible, the thesis offers resources for more thoughtful interruption and reconfiguration – small but meaningful ways of reshaping

what global in higher education can be. The next section turns to this more explicitly, drawing together the key conceptual and empirical contributions and framing them as an open-ended invitation rather than a closed conclusion.

Key Contributions and an Open-Ended Invitation

Bringing the discussion together, several key contributions of the thesis can be distilled. They are not offered as final answers, but as points of departure – concepts and sensibilities that others might take up, adapt, or contest.

Global as co-produced and plural

The thesis shows that universities are not global in a single, stable way. Global is co-produced through entangled actions of many humans (students, staff, administrators, partners) and non-humans (technologies, buildings, documents, policies, weather systems). These entanglements give rise to multiple globalities rather than one universal model. Recognising this helps loosen the grip of a dominant “one best way” vision of the global university and breaks open both the global/local binary and the idea of universities as passive “victims” of globalisation. Global and local are not opposing categories; they are made together in practice.

Spatial entanglement and relational agency

The thesis introduces a more explicitly spatial vocabulary into global HE debates, through concepts such as spatial entanglement and relational geographies. It argues that global relations are always situated – in residence halls, server rooms, community clinics, city streets, virtual classrooms. Excellence and global reach are therefore

reframed as relational achievements, not abstract competitions. This has implications for how global engagement is assessed: attention shifts from counting outputs or partnerships to exploring the quality, directions, and consequences of the relations that constitute globality in particular places.

A further contribution of this thesis is to foreground the role of non-human actors in shaping the global university. From digital platforms and recruitment algorithms, through visa regimes and timetabling software, to architecture, infrastructure, and everyday objects such as coffee cups, non-human actors participate in producing global academic space. Decentring the human in this way aligns the thesis with posthumanist scholarship and suggests that “managing” a global university is as much about IT governance, campus design, and infrastructural choices as it is about international strategies. It invites institutions to take material agents seriously as constitutive of global connectivity, exclusion, and change.

Everyday practices as sites of world-making

The research treats everyday academic practices as sites where the global is made. These are moments where it is decided what – and who – matters in the global context. Seeing them this way invites more reflexive, careful attention to daily routines, not as trivial background to “big” global strategies, but as opportunities to foster inclusion, solidarity, curiosity, and new forms of recognition across borders.

Reimagined global imaginaries

The thesis contributes to rethinking the global imaginary itself. Instead of assuming an implicit Western, metrics-driven prototype, it surfaces imaginaries grounded in

epistemic justice alongside those grounded in competition and prestige. This responds to decolonial and critical calls to pluralise global knowledge and to recognise that “being global” can be imagined in different, sometimes conflicting ways. It encourages universities to notice which imaginaries are currently dominant, which remain marginal, and what might change if other visions were allowed to guide policy and practice.

Linking globalisation to planetary ethics

Finally, by taking the Anthropocene seriously, the thesis brings globalisation theory into closer conversation with environmental urgency. It argues that any contemporary understanding of globalisation in higher education must attend to the planetary impacts of academic work – from conference travel to data centres, from building projects to international campuses. This is both a conceptual extension (expanding what “global” entails to include biophysical relations) and a normative one (suggesting that global responsibility includes ecological responsibility). It positions the global university as a key site where questions of planetary citizenship, not only global citizenship, are at stake.

Collectively, these contributions offer a different basis for thinking about policy and practice in higher education. An institution drawing on this work might, for example, invest in intercultural mentoring or community-rooted global projects as seriously as in international marketing campaigns; create spaces to discuss the environmental footprint of research alongside celebrating international collaborations; or design digital and physical infrastructures with relational, ethical, and ecological questions in mind, not only efficiency or visibility.

A concept to think with

This thesis advances the “global university” as an analytic device. It draws attention to the relational, material, and ethical dimensions of globalisation in higher education, and it shifts the question from “Is this university global?” to “How is globality being made, felt, and contested here, and with what effects?”

- ? *What if definitions of “global” started from interactions?*
- ? *What if we paid closer attention to infrastructures of translation – human and technological – that carry knowledge across languages and cultures?*
- ? *How do frictions in supervision, when advisors and students navigate different cultural, institutional or epistemic expectations, enact particular versions of the global?*

These questions resonate with Massey’s call for a global sense of place and with Barad’s insistence on entangled responsibility. They keep the focus on how globality is done, not only on how it is described.

Ultimately, the global university, as re-imagined here, is less a template to implement than an open horizon. It is a way of seeing and being in the university that keeps connectivity, partiality, and co-responsibility in view. In taking up this view, the thesis aligns with and contributes to more transdisciplinary, socially attuned accounts of globalisation – ones capable of thinking equity, epistemicide, and ecological crisis alongside student mobility, research collaboration and curriculum design. The

university appears not as a passive reactor to global forces, but as a key site where the meaning of the global is continuously negotiated, stabilised and unsettled.

Rather than closing down conversation, this chapter ends by extending an invitation to continue thinking with the idea of the global university, and through the concrete practices that give it shape. In doing so, the hope is to keep open a space for ongoing inquiry and imagination about how higher education might navigate and co-create global realities more thoughtfully, more inclusively, and more responsibly.

As you pause in the place where you are reading – noticing the objects, messages, memories, technologies, and traces of others around you – where do these relations lead, and what wider worlds do they quietly connect you to?

This is the process that makes university global – the persistent effort to engage with and live through relations that reach beyond the here and now.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Vikki Boliver's (2015) cluster analysis

Table 2. Cluster mean values (standard deviations in parentheses)

	Cluster 1(N=2)	Cluster 2(N=39)	Cluster 3(N=67)	Cluster 4(N=19)
Research activity				
Research income adjusted	37,100 (6,131)	21,356 (6,128)	5,740 (4,727)	1,620 (1,617)
% postgraduates	37.0 (3.9)	31.2 (8.0)	20.0 (7.7)	20.9 (11.7)
RAE score in 2008	3.0 (0.0)	2.9 (0.3)	2.0 (0.2)	1.7 (0.4)
Teaching quality				
% students satisfied with teaching	92.5 (0.7)	88.7 (1.9)	84.5 (3.4)	84.1 (2.9)
% students satisfied with feedback	73.0 (2.8)	67.9 (4.4)	69.4 (4.2)	69.5 (3.6)
<i>Guardian</i> value-added score out of 10	6.5 (0.7)	6.0 (0.7)	5.5 (1.1)	4.1 (1.4)
Economic resources				
Endowment/investment income (£000s)	23,871 (5,481)	4,266 (4,345)	687 (555)	392 (340)
Academic services spending per capita	2,812 (384)	1,514 (331)	1,055 (289)	724 (379)
Student-staff ratio	11.3 (0.4)	14.4 (1.8)	18.8 (2.2)	22.6 (3.9)
Academic selectivity				
Average UCAS points on entry	595 (18)	442 (47)	308 (33)	251 (28)
% students completing their degree	98.7 (0.4)	92.2 (4.5)	82.9 (5.0)	78.5 (7.0)
% students achieving a "good degree"	89.3 (3.5)	78.2 (5.0)	55.0 (5.5)	63.4 (5.6)
Socioeconomic student mix				
% students not from low participation neighbourhoods	96.6 (0.3)	93.2 (2.8)	87.4 (5.1)	82.3 (6.2)
% students from more advantaged social class backgrounds	89.4 (1.5)	77.4 (5.0)	61.6 (6.7)	56.4 (5.5)
% students from private schools	34.9 (2.9)	16.1 (8.2)	3.6 (3.0)	1.4 (0.9)

Appendix B: Map of Concepts and Interview Questions

Concept – The broad areas of the study	Key considerations	Direct, leading questions (Qs)	Indirect, Structuring, Follow-up Qs	Students	Employees
Opening – warm-up QS		Could you tell me about your role at the university?	What do you do at this university? Why did you choose this university?	What is your degree? What is important to you about your education?	What are you working on and what are your responsibilities/
Space	Sphere of multiplicity in which distinct trajectories and heterogeneity co-exist	Could you describe the various aspects of university that you can think of?	Which are the most meaningful, impactful?	What do you love the most about university?	What do you like the most about your workplace?
	The product of interrelations, Constituted through interaction.	Where and how university allows you to make connections? Where do you interact?	Could you describe some of the interactions that university facilitates?	What about your interaction with academics and staff? How and when?	How and when do you interact with students?
Place	Characterised by negotiations Thrown-togetherness of here and now	What are some of the challenges that university pose? Can you think of particular situation which you overcame?	How did you adapt? What happened? What did you do?		What are some of the struggles you face? How do you deal with them?
		Is there a very vivid moment that you can recall which has happened within university?	What happened? Why do you remember it so well?	What are your most memorable moments?	Which moments of work you recall the best?
Matter, materialisation	Come into being, transformation	Reflecting on your experience so far, what changes or transformation have happened that can be attributed to university?	Yourself, your every-day. In what way university shapes your worldview?		
	Material-discursive entanglements.	What would you say are the greatest opportunities university has provided(s)? How did(do) you take advantage?	What are the outcomes, benefits?		
		If you could change something in the university, what would it be?	Why?	What would you change about your academic or non-academic experience?	What would you like to see improved?

Appendix C: Ethics Approval

18/01/2026, 02:24

Email - Darta Antonio - Outlook



CUREC

From Liam Gearon <liam.gearon@education.ox.ac.uk>
Date Wed 26/05/2021 17:31
To Darta Drabovica <darta.drabovica@education.ox.ac.uk>
Cc Maia Chankseliani <maia.chankseliani@education.ox.ac.uk>; Simon Marginson <simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk>; Student CUREC <student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk>

Dear Darta

Rationalising global university through post-qualitative inquiry into space and place/s of higher education institutions [CIA-21-255]

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

Please continue to follow all current guidance issued by CUREC during the pandemic, notably COVID-19: CUREC guidance on research involving human participants, <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus>

If relevant please also check the CUREC website for their best practice research guides, <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg>

Good luck with your research study,

Keep well and safe,

Yours sincerely,

All good wishes,

Liam

Chair, DREC

Liam Francis Gearon, PhD, FHEA, FRSA, Docent



Senior Research Fellow, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford
Associate Professor, Department of Education, University of Oxford
Conjoint Full Professor, Newcastle University, Australia
Docent, University of Helsinki, Finland
Extraordinary Professor, North-West University, South Africa
Visiting Professor, Irish Institute for Catholic Studies, MIC, Limerick, Ireland
Honorary Senior Research Fellow, School of Education, University of Birmingham

<https://outlook.office365.com/mail/id/AAQ&AGZkNDhhZTtyLTNmNTtNDI2OS04NDRIITlhYzZmOWQ0MGlyZQAQAFHLS%2BD0QU9jmlH6atphZoM...> 1/1

Appendix D: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [CIA-21-255]

Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

My doctoral thesis proposes an emergent place-based approach that understands global university through situated material-discursive practices. In particular, it will investigate how the global is produced through the locality of university and its spatial dynamics. In this way, it will attend to the ways university helps us to interrelate and how that drives global imaginary.

Why have I been invited to take part?

The research seeks participants involved with university practices, either being enrolled at or being employed by the university that could provide insight in their experience of university spaces.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is completely your own personal decision. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason. Withdrawal can be made by advising me. If you withdrawal before this date and have contributed data to the study, it will withdraw and thus will not be used in the study.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

If you decide to take part in this study you will be invited to an interview (around 30 min)

- The interview will either take place online - over the MS Teams platform or in a safe space within university. You will be asked to talk about your university experience and engagement with university spaces.
- Before taking part, you will be asked to sign either online or written consent form.
- You will be involved in the research for short period of time, the interview process should not take more than 40 minutes of your time

- The interview is designed for you to express and explain your everyday experience of university. It is designed to give you an opportunity to reflect your experience or perception of the university.
- With your consent, I would like to audio record you because it will help me with the accuracy of our conversation as well as the analysis process. Additionally recordings will be transcribed, which in turn will help me to anonymise your response and protect your identity.
- At any time you can pause the research or stop the activities. Your wellbeing is the priority during the data collection.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

There are no foreseen disadvantages or risks in taking part in this research. However, it is possible that some participants may experience bad emotions or might feel discomfort. In such cases you have a right to raise any concerns and/or withdraw.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

There will be no direct or personal benefit to you from taking part in this research.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

Identifiable data (including consent forms) will be stored in a secure place only accessible by myself. Your audio recording and/or images will be stored up to 3 years and will be destroyed once the thesis is completed. Consent forms will be kept for 3 years in the secured location.

I would like your permission to the processed and wholly anonymised data in future studies, and to share this with other researchers (e.g. in online databases). You will not be identifiable in any future studies.

I will not collect sensitive data like age, sex or ethnicity and I will keep university name confidential. The division and according department as well as university characteristics will be specified and included in research findings.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up in a doctoral thesis. Potentially it will also be used in academic publications, conference presentations or websites. None of these outputs will include data that identifies you. Your privacy will be secured regardless of the data presentation. If you wish to obtain a copy of the published results, please inform the researcher. The study will take place over the next two to three years after which time the published results will be publicly available.

I will ask you for permission to use direct quotations but without identifying you in any research outputs. If so, only a code assigned to your responses will be used. Alternatively, you may choose for your quotes not to be used under any circumstance.

A copy of my thesis will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: CIA-21-255).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Darta Drabovica at the Department of Education, Oxford on 07519245146 or darta.drabovica@education.ox.ac.uk, or research supervisors Maia Chankseliani at maia.chankseliani@education.ox.ac.uk, Simon Marginson at simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk. We will do our best to answer your query. Your concern will be acknowledged within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the relevant Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Darta Drabovica
Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
Telephone: 07519245146
University email: darta.drabovica@education.ox.ac.uk.

