Worlding Classrooms
Studying local-global issues through a multi-polar lens

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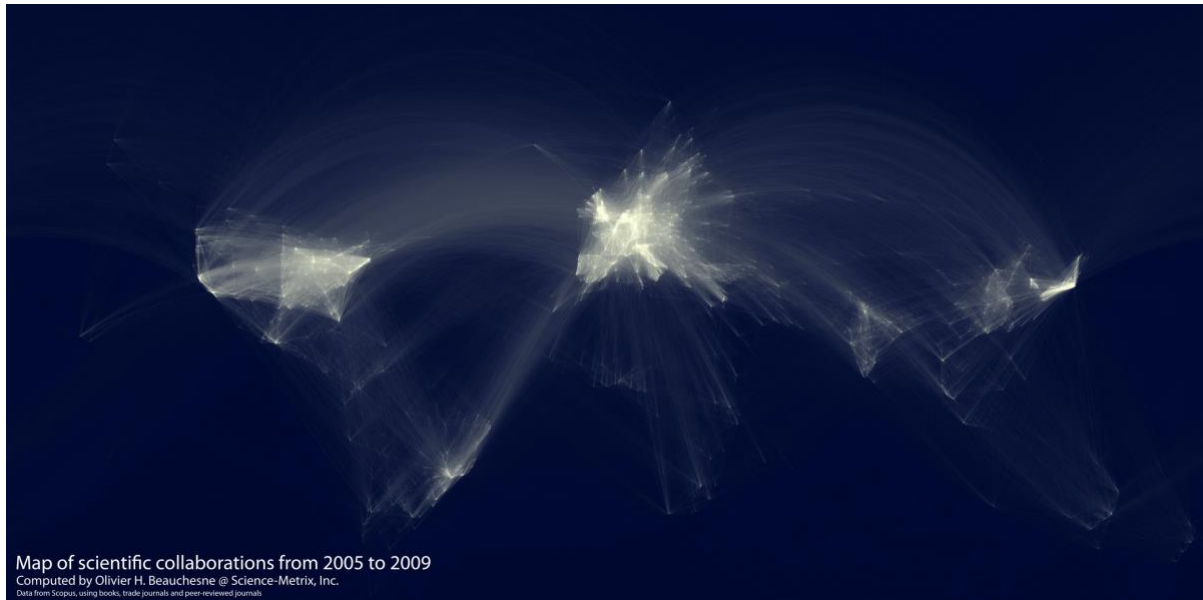l.smith@fm.ru.nl

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Introduction

Over the last decade education on themes linking globalization to human mobility and
developmental issues has become increasingly subject to revision. This was not only due to
fast changing dynamics in the current world order, but also because of an increased recognition,
through debates in fields such as critical feminism and post-colonialism, that the theoretical
premises of our educational programmes still very much rested on increasingly problematic
paradigms. These hail from a past in which development was seen as a largely technocratic and
linear process, and whereby development programmes were clearly scripted on western ideals
of what progress needed to entail, largely adhering to standardized norms. Of course this also
related to colonial ruling, and the idea that education should either primarily help develop an
administration that would support resource extraction and sustain power relations between
ruling colonizers and subversive colonies. However it also derived from missionary activities
whereby attempts to Christianize local populations came attached with all manner of economic
and cultural practises and associated discourses attempting to 'civilize' these local populations,
for instance promoting literacy. (Kay & Nystrom 1971; *Rizvi et al.* 2006:250)

With the onset of independence of an increasing part of the global south, the agenda on
education slowly shifted, as countries struggled to redefine the role of education, responding
to centuries of colonial practise, that arguably also had a strong impact on core identities and
self-esteem, as some authors argue (Kay & Nystrom 1971). Educational programmes have
remained very much set in the global north however, as is for instance visible with the global
adoption of Cambridge University's Ordinary and Advanced secondary school programme
(now GCSE). This strongly paralleled other developmental interventions and therein also
largely adhered to an ideology of development as a global modernization project (Simm &
Marvell 2017). Such hegemony in theorizing societal development is obviously problematic,
for it accords superiority to one cultural paradigm, failing to accept the value of alternative
perspectives.

In tertiary education the debate has turned to the dominance of western scholars in global theory development, as exhibited in accredited journal publications. In 2010 Olivier Beauchesne computed the map below, showing the geographical locations of institutions of all authors in accredited journals:

Map of scientific collaborations from 2005 to 2009
Computed by Olivier H. Beauchesne @ Science-Metrix, Inc.
Data from Scopus, using books, trade journals and peer-reviewed journals

Source: www.science-metrix.com

This map provokes various questions but the key message for this paper is how it painfully clearly shows the notable relative absence of academic publications from the African continent. Whilst the exact data used for this measurement can perhaps be contested, and the quantity of academic output is a questionable measure of impact of science at regional and national levels, the difference in contribution between Africa and other continents in this map is simply too great, and that is worrying. Other analyses, such as that by Archambault (2010), who focuses on the shift over time in relative contributions to total academic output per continent shows, based on Web of Science data, only confirm the prior map.
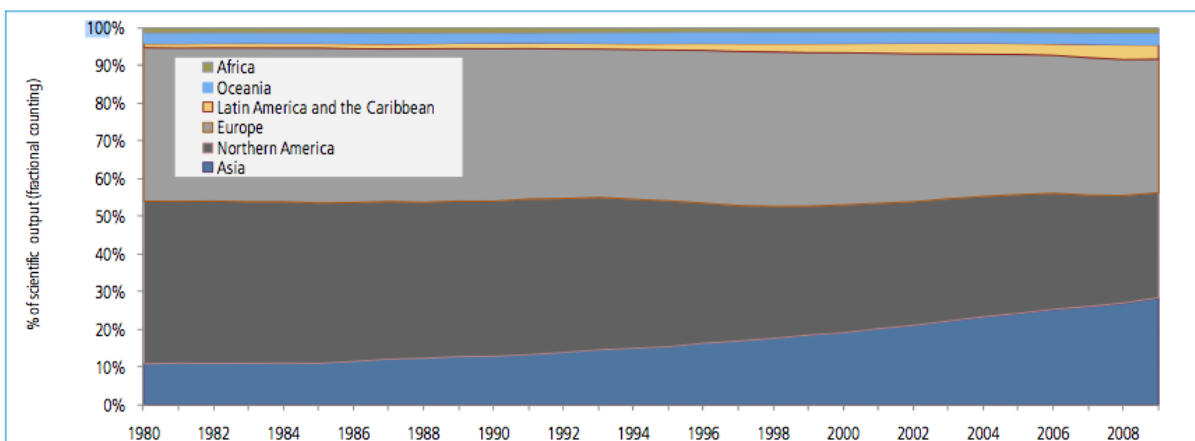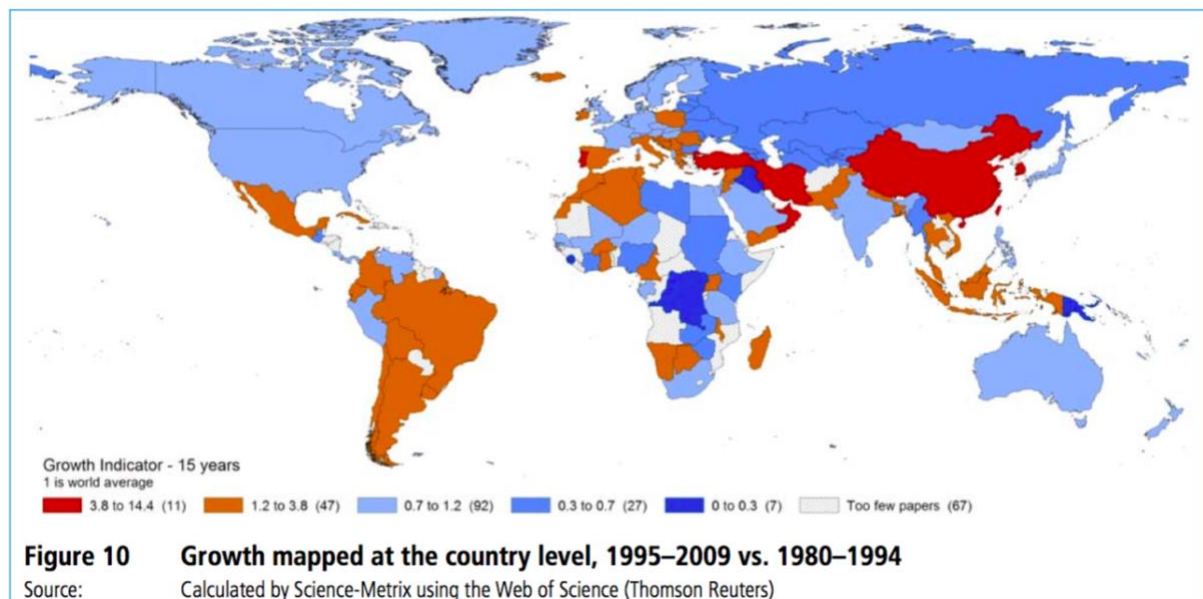

Figure 8   **Contribution to world science by region, expressed as percentage, 1980–2009**
Note: Major geographical regions are based on United Nations definitions; note that Northern America includes Bermuda, Canada, Greenland, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, and the US.
Source: Calculated by Science-Metrix using the Web of Science (Thomson Reuters)

Source: Archambault 2010:7

In this graph we see that where the other two continents largely falling under the banner of the Global South, i.e. Latin America and Asia, have recorded a relative growth in output. The African contribution (top layer) has unfortunately remained somewhat nominal, and essentially unchanged, at only 1% of the global publication output. An in-depth analysis at country level (figure below) by Archambault (2010) furthermore reveals that there are significant differences in the share of academic output between African countries. Thus, countries like Ghana, Morocco, Namibia and Botswana a.o. show an above average increase in publications output when the two 15-year periods are compared.

Growth Indicator - 15 years
1 is world average

3.8 to 14.4 (11)   1.2 to 3.8 (47)   0.7 to 1.2 (92)   0.3 to 0.7 (27)   0 to 0.3 (7)   Too few papers (67)

Figure 10   **Growth mapped at the country level, 1995–2009 vs. 1980–1994**

Source: Calculated by Science-Metrix using the Web of Science (Thomson Reuters)

Source: Archambault 2010:7

What these statistics showcase essentially showcase is a strong bias in where new ideas come from, but also how a dominance of theories arising out of the western world remain. Scholars like Hentschel (2014) and Abdumaliq Simone have pointed out arising conceptual bias, even misunderstandings that thereby emerge in their work on urban change, with the latter's 2018 volume *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance from an Urban South* for instance delving into 'simple' concepts such as 'the poor', 'the working class' – categories pre-defining a studied field, potentially completely misunderstanding local lives and the spatial organization of locally enacted socio-cultural dynamics. The same applies to all kinds of other concepts as these are universally and uncritically applied to rather different contexts and processes. Also, in tertiary education curricula around the world, including in the global south, standard theories still much abound, largely building on the work of renown western based philosophers, with the occasional Asian or Latin American scholar slipping in. The conceptual angles thereby produced thereby feed into policy design and the implementation thereof, e.g. the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals. The overall picture is thus clear – for too long academic debate has taken place in the global north, with too little input from the global south.

The emergence of critical theoretical discourse has resulted in this dominance slowly beginning to whither. For instance in the case of research project proposal writing by consortia comprising institutes in the global north and global south, until recent it was very often the case that the partner in the global north had the lead, with the involvement of global south institutes limited mainly to the execution of research, e.g. collecting field data. Gradually we are seeing a shift

to more equal partnership with transnational engagement now also extending to the problematization, conceptualization, writing and evaluative phases.

We thereby also see insights from the global south slowly permeating into academic discussion on developments in the global north (e.g. on community participation). These often derive from developmental practices in the global south, applied by local and foreign practitioner teams. Decades of applied knowledge on all kinds of developmental questions, intended to focus on the global south, are now slowly being integrated into programmes in the global north, e.g. on how to organize microfinance programmes, or how to set societal change in motion with concepts such as *ubuntu* (van Oorschot 2003: 26; Baart 2016).

In this paper I focus on a possible future transnational modality for education (at master level). Thereby I apply this to the field of human geography, and more particularly the exploration of local-global interactions such as human migration, rural-urban connectivity, and associated notions of societal change or development this brings about. To that end the paper starts off with a discussion on the current status quo in higher education after which it turns to some general premises to help achieve transnational forms of educational exchange, followed by a hypothetical example that is steeped in personal experiences, to end with a discussion of some key considerations on the very relevance of transnational educational exchanges and how these also need to be immersed in societal learning.

The status quo in higher education
In a post-colonial era, that has seen the emergence of increasingly critical and fundamental engagement with long-standing and pervasive premises on what can be considered as good development, and what direction should the world might on questions of global mobility (material and immaterial), it is a concern that we still configure our Master programmes in fairly geographically and culturally confined ways, using articles and cases to engage with other places and regions, interspersed with occasional guest lectures by foreign speakers, and eventually –for some– a chance to do their thesis research abroad. Yet, even if the latter does occur - when engagement and a real exposure to other worlds outside the campus cocoon only takes place at that moment of doing fieldwork abroad this may come too late – as a phase of problematization and conceptualization, and a moment to adequately and aptly engage (also out of an awareness of own privilege). With the educational baggage already attained by then, this stage may have been mentally passed.

However, a worlding classroom approach exemplifies an important cultural turn in education, bringing internationalisation to a next level. It calls for a "reevaluation of the interrelationship between space and learning" (Waters, 2017: 282), and marks an important shift away from archetypal local educational spaces (*ibid*, 279), not only by recognizing the increasing diversity within student populations (Paull et al. 2016: 490), but also by inciting student-led learning processes.

International education - a transnational perspective
Despite the fact that we have, over the last decade, seen strongly increasing participation of foreign students in Master programmes around The Netherlands, the exposure of Dutch students to issues elsewhere in the world remains limited, in my view. To that end I argue for the need to take a more progressive perspective on internationalisation than the current ambitions of many universities. For instance my own employer, the Radboud University, in its

2018 vision publication: *'Radboud International 2025'*, states how it considers: "..the inclusion of an international and intercultural context in our educational system as crucial to its quality" (2018:3). This I fully support, yet in the further elaboration in that document to explain how this might be achieved, the focus is largely on facilitating the international classroom *on campus*.

Yet NUFFIC, the Dutch organization for internationalisation in education in a recent vision document on internationalisation, explains that internationalisation of education refers to three key dimensions: (1) student mobility (exchange programmes) between countries; (2) to 'internationalisation at home', which concerns developing international competencies within the own country; and (3) to transnational education, in which the educational programme itself is international in design (2018:105-106).

The worlding classroom brings the second and third dimensions together, whilst any students who are keen to go abroad (to one of the partner countries) for their thesis research also bring in the first dimension. In my view this is a much more integral and holistic approach towards international education, with students actively driving their own learning process, to facilitate substantive academic engagement across continental divides, transnationally connecting students and their respective studies to each other, to produce a multi-polar educational 'playing field' as they work communally on particular topics through course assignments and in their thesis work.

With a transnational design, connecting universities around the world, the worlding classroom seeks to incite serious comparative analysis of situations around the world by connecting students (and indirectly supporting academics) to jointly assess particular societal processes (Solem 2007:168). Such an approach helps to better understand global-local connections in issues such as societal views on migrants, the meaning of citizenship and the future of cities. Issues studied are intimately connected to society, and require a learning approaches with this society (communities of practise). Thus given study sites are also places of practices, and not distant, objective entities (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012; Hentschel 2015; Roy & Ong 2011).

The idea, thereby, is not only to successfully set up cross-continental exchanges between graduate students (Paull *et al.*, 2016; Oberhelman & Dunn 2019), but also to embed these in societal exchange and outreach. In our view inclusiveness through societal engagement by academic institutes should not be limited to valorising *research* efforts, as we have done in the past with migrant incentives in countries of origin (see Smith *et al.* 2014), but also to extend this to *education*. For this, students from participating universities are required to engage with society-derived issues, e.g. on urban change and processes of inclusion/ exclusion, or on migration and citizenship), tackling these around the globe in transnational teams, thereby also relating and discussing their findings with society in communities of practise. This in-depth engagement, both with each other across the globe, and with local societies, will create a heightened sensitization and ability with students to critically play out, after completing their education, their role as engaged and critically active global citizens.

A possible partnership programme
An educational programme, in which fundamental exchange across three continents is facilitated through a series of research exchanges on key contemporary issues, could help to offset the current limited and late engagement with global issues imbalance. This will help to engage our human geography master students at the Radboud University with counterpart students in other countries, such as partners we already cooperate with in education based in

United Kingdom (Scotland), Ghana, South Africa and Indonesia.

Premised in already built up educational cooperation, e.g. with educational development support through curriculum design and educational workshops and guest lectures (also online), alongside student thesis research (mostly oriented towards the global south partners, less in the other direction, except where PhD candidates are concerned) and exchange programmes, each of these countries provides an own empirical reality in which to contextualise and problematize a certain set of general societal issues, such as on cities and inclusionary/exclusionary processes; or concerns around migration and scales of citizenship. For the latter theme, which could for instance focus on how migration connects with globalization and political agendas, local approaches might discern very different core concerns, e.g. for Indonesia the demographic challenges associated with internal migration and the economic differences between its regions is an important matter. For South Africa the continuing 'white brain' flight is considered an issue, notably as it is viewed rather differently than the continued arrival of migrants from other African countries. Ghana presents a typical case of a middle-income country that is seeing shifting developments in its prior persistent outflow of migrants to foreign destination with the emergence an urban based middle-income population. A complicating matter is the impact of climate change on internal migration, notably from the northern regions to its southern region cities. And finally, Scotland, as part of the United Kingdom, presents a unique case, in which the Brexit crisis is giving rise to new perspectives amongst its youth, as part of the United Kingdom, whether and where, to migrate.

Whilst the existing array of cooperative activities are valuable already, they are generally bilateral and also confined more to exchanges between lecturers/curriculum developers, whilst exchanges between remains limited at best. As argued before, in an era for education in which critical post-colonial thinking is calling for a re-booting of how and where knowledge is produced, we consider structural exchange between students in the global south and north to be of key importance.

It is thus the ambition of this programme to realize a long-term transnational cooperation in Master education between the institutes involved through educational activities. This includes thesis research, which may eventually not only connect to societal issues but also feed the research agenda of collaborating institutes in exploring opportunities for comparative follow-up research at a PhD level. Collaboration always calls for some compromises, and it is foreseen that some minor adjustments may need to be made to respective Master programmes and technical preparations made to facilitate worlding classroom initiatives, albeit that the Covid-19 crisis has fast tracked solutions to some initial ICT hurdles.

In an envisaged *programme* we would want to differentiate between preparations made before the formal start of the programme, those required during a one year Master programme, and reflections on what we've learned from the programme for further collaboration.
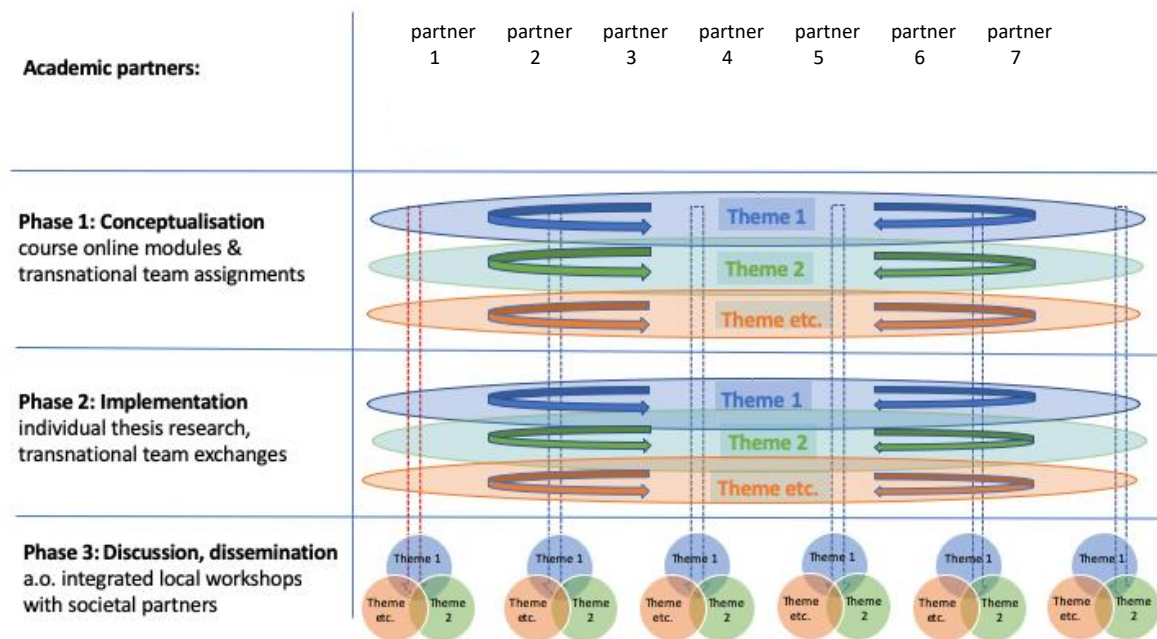
Phase 1 (semester 1):
After a training session on intercultural exchange (sensitization, debating techniques, organizing principles), numerous online sessions will take place during this first semester, connecting students interested in a same global theme. Led by the students, focus will be on: (1) how, around the world, a particular issue/theme is perceived and problematized by academics, society and in governance; (2) relevant conceptual approaches to explore the issue/theme; (3) suitable methodological tools to use in thesis research; and (4) planning for continued transnational exchange during the 2nd phase, the thesis research.

Student output: (1) position paper on the issue/theme by the group (providing a comparative approach); (2) short video presentation by the group of key discussion points in their sessions, and how these return in choices for thesis proposals in their respective research sites, to be shared on the programme web-platform; (3) an individual reflection on the merits and challenges of a transnational learning process. This will show their growing sensitization to comparative knowledge and problematizations, and also give insight in their sense of relevant social skills.

Phase 2: Master thesis research (semester 2):
Mainly comprises master thesis research. Whilst the final product (thesis) is individual, students are expected to report back to their transnational teams at regular moments, to give support to one another with feedback during various phases of research (e.g. to discuss first insights, to discern relevant approaches to data collection and analysis, and in sharing writing output).

Student output: Master theses, which will - conditional to regulations of respective academic partners – also be shared on a programme web-platform, also in the form of an executive summary/occasional paper.

Phase 3 Dissemination and evaluation (post-semester 2):
We strongly suggest that fieldwork dissemination activities, such as interactive workshops with communities engaged with, are set up so students, helped by local partners, can discuss

insights with local societal partners. To avoid this being a haphazard one-off occasion we suggest to incite a series of annual workshops in the selected communities per country to help set up 'communities of practice', making society participatory to research, perhaps even inciting *citizen science*. Societal partners can thereby also help disseminate findings to other relevant channels.

Student outputs: Organizing societal workshops, and drawing up a final reflection taking in insights from the individual reflection of phase 1, to discuss insights gained at the end of the trajectory on the merits and challenges of a transnational learning process.

Discussion

The original ideas for this paper arose out of a strong personal conviction, shared by various colleagues at my own department, to take our students out of their comfort zones and expose them at an as early possible stage to a world they were less aware of, well outside the security of their Dutch origins. Thereby I also saw it as a personal quest to make students aware of a world 'out there', sensitizing them to become more aware and more reflective of their own disposition and how this affected the way they looked at issues around them, local and *glocal*. A third concern related to the fact that we have always felt uncomfortable, and perhaps increasingly so, with the imbalance in student exchanges, notably with partners in the so-called global south, whereby long standing relations with colleagues elsewhere allowed for a continuous outflow of Dutch students to other parts of the world, where they were often warmly welcomed by our academic partners, and helped along with their research of local issues, whilst a reverse flow of Indonesian, Ghanaian, South African, Philippines, Kenyan, etc. students remained rather more limited. The core matter here were the limited financial means of these students, and – realizing that this situation was unlikely to change, unless through the initiation of a sponsored programme – the alternative was the creation of a transnational space through which to exchange and communicate on insights. This would not only result in a much stronger sense of relational insights, through the application of certain common concepts (public space, smart cities, skilled migration, sustainable economies, citizenship, etc.) to local matters, to then have sustained insight exchanges on (hopefully resulting in prolonged transnational professional networks), but also help achieve a somewhat reduced carbon footprint[1].

While there is obvious value in revised educational programmes through systemic, reciprocal and equal transnational engagements, there is also a need to engage with society, through research activity elements incorporated in the educational programme (notably thesis research), also resulting in output that is of clear value to society. This is also one of the goals of this programme, namely to not only set up cross-continental exchanges between graduate students, but also to embed these exchanges in opportunities of societal exchange and outreach. In our view inclusiveness through societal engagement (thus connecting the 2 sub-themes), is not only about testing and valorizing research conducted, but also about inciting a more in-depth engagement between scholars representing different cultures, for instance assessing what criteria support a legitimate application for asylum status of a refugee, or discerning key parameters for worthwhile transnational development initiatives of migrant collectives with their home communities. In our view these kinds of discussions, and the preparation towards them, as well as their follow-up, speak directly to the educational institutes to provide rich learning environments, but also to be receptive to salient societal issues, through societally

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[1] Albeit that in the concept programme shared above the Nijmegen students were generally thought to still be travelling, showing that there are still various rough ethical edges to consider..

steeped modes of engagement, thereby accepting a more equal role in knowledge creation.

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