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## **International curriculum transfer in Geography in Higher Education: an example**

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## **International curriculum transfer in Geography in Higher Education: an example**

### **Abstract**

Internationalization of geography in higher education comes in many guises. This paper discusses some of these, with particular attention to curriculum development and transfer. The context is Bangladesh and a case study is presented of a link programme between three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in that country and one in the UK. The British Council funded project INSPIRE provided funding and organizational support for a project that lasted four years and enabled 22 staff visits from Bangladesh to the UK and 6 in the other direction. As a result, curricula of 43 teaching modules in the general area of environmental hazard and risk, environmental change, and climate change have been initiated or revised. While this type of transnational knowledge transfer has its drawbacks, we argue that there are specific circumstances in which it can work.

**Keywords:** Internationalization; curriculum development; Bangladesh

### **Introduction**

Most of the geographical literature on pedagogy, curriculum development and the links between research and teaching has hitherto been authored from the Global North on topics principally of interest to universities in that part of the world. The *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* is no exception to this preponderance of what, in effect, are Euro-American voices, although we are pleased to note the recent inclusion in this journal of papers from Singapore, China and India (Kong 2007; Li et al. 2007; Singh 2009).

The present offering is a reflection on the relationships between geographers in the developed and developing realms and the degree to which in a postcolonial setting it is possible to draw mutual strength from formal programmes of exchange. We begin with a rationale for funded linkages, whether department-to-department or between networks of institutions. To an extent these depend upon the context of the funding stream but we argue that for success there need to be a number of non-monetary factors in place, amounting to academic motivation and goodwill. Second, we look at the practical and intellectual problems associated with any relationship between institutions that are thousands of miles apart. Third, the circumstances of higher education in Bangladesh are considered. While there is no such thing as a typical or representative model for the Global South, Bangladesh does exhibit a

number of characteristics that are familiar in countries still within 50 years of independence that need investment in their university sectors. Finally, a specific case study will be rehearsed of a link between three institutions in Bangladesh and one in the United Kingdom.

### **Rationale**

While our particular interest is in the transfer of ideas and systems of learning, we acknowledge that much of the debate about internationalization in higher education has focused on student mobility. According to this argument, a major migratory stream has emerged in response to demand from the Global South (Healey 2008). Given the fees charged, this is now an industry of significance, with substantial net flows from South to North. In 2010, for instance, 4.1 million students globally were abroad for their tertiary studies, a doubling in just ten years (OECD 2012) and likely to rise to 7 million by 2020 (Altbach et al. 2009). In 2010 2.2 million came from Asia (for South Asia see Table 1) and 77% of migrant students overall made their way to OECD countries (41% in Europe and 20% in North America). Among the larger players, the highest positive ratios between inbound and outbound students were those of Australia (25.8:1), the UK (14.3:1) and the USA (12.4:1). As a result of the net inflow, 21.2% of tertiary students in Australia were international in origin, and there were large inbound slices also in the UK (16.0%), Austria and Switzerland (15.4%), New Zealand (14.2%) and France (11.6%).

**Table 1. South Asian tertiary students studying abroad**

<b>Origin</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2010</b>
Bangladesh	6590	7702	11,370	14,281	14,319	16,316	21,221
Bhutan	691	729	651	559	902	939	1228
India	50,119	58,077	96,021	129,581	141,287	179,425	203,468
Maldives	220	807	1073	1124	1222	1912	1996
Nepal	3785	4300	6271	7618	11,300	17,953	24,202
Pakistan	13,124	14,457	19,279	22,194	24,668	29,456	36,383
Sri Lanka	5940	6660	8918	9495	11,042	15,270	16,510

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco>

In addition to the flood of migrant students, higher education is experiencing other modes of internationalization. Distance learning is one that has been with us for decades, starting with correspondence degree courses, supplemented later by media such as television and video, and most recently experiencing a makeover with the advent of the internet. Software such as skype makes live communication between student and teacher possible and lectures can be streamed where the local bandwidth allows. The UK higher education sector now has more transnational students on distance learning programmes (500,000) than it does students physically relocating to its shores (430,000).<sup>1</sup> Offshore higher education seems to be another coming trend, either with the franchising of courses through authorised agents or located on the 200 branch campuses now operating worldwide, many of them joint ventures with local universities.<sup>2</sup> About half of these are American enterprises, with both Australia and the UK also weighing in (Waters 2009). An intriguing recent development has been the opening of South-South branch campuses, which now represent 16% of the total (Lasanowski 2010).

Degree credit mobility (Findlay et al. 2012) and short exchanges are yet another strand of this mode of internationalization, facilitated in the European Union by the Erasmus funding programmes and by the improved alignment of pedagogic and assessment regimes under the Bologna process (Sweeney 2012). In a sense this idea is an extension of the already well-established tradition of intercalated degrees for language or medical students spending a year overseas.

International students are said to be worth £8 billion annually to the British economy (Willets 2012). But reducing academic endeavour to purely monetary values misses a lot of exchanges and links that have other motivations. The first of these is the internationalization strategy that seeks to drive up academic standards, particularly of research, by establishing networks of staff contacts worldwide. Many universities in the UK, Western Europe and North America have been international in this way for decades. A traditional driver has been the sabbatical system, where staff use their research leave entitlement to work in a different university that has potential collaborators or where there are resources such as libraries or laboratories that normally cannot be accessed. The speaking tour is a variant on this theme, and another attraction is the increasing number of international conferences that are important for keeping abreast of developments in a particular research area and for the networking that is vital for establishing research and publication partnerships. Although much of this activity is North-North, there are increasing opportunities for university staff from the Global South

through fellowship programmes or conference fee waivers. As Raento (2009, 519) comments: “Most scholars still prefer to exchange ideas face to face and appreciate the informal social dimensions of their work.”

A second non-monetary motivation has been for higher education institutions to encourage their staff and students to become global citizens. This is now popular in British universities through the establishment of Institutes of Advanced Study, the principal purpose of which is to bring scholars in from outside in order to inspire the local staff, establish collaborations, and increase the international profile of the host institution. Research rather than teaching is at the forefront here, with joint applications for funding across institutions and international boundaries now becoming commonplace. The pay-off is in terms of international reputation, which is as important in the academic world as it is in business. Whether one likes the methodology or not, global standing is now measured in league tables, such as those published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement's* World University Rankings.<sup>3</sup> Despite these laudable efforts, one suspects that European geographers do not yet approach the international exposure of their American colleagues. This was shown in an Association of American Geographers survey in 2005 to be 24.4 per cent of postsecondary faculty who were ‘formally engaged with an international colleague in a teaching collaboration’ (Ray and Solem 2009), and 57.3 per cent who had a track record of international research collaboration. In addition the National Science Foundation has funded a large and impressive programme of mutual interest between geographers in the United States and central and south America known as AAMIGA (Advancing Academe: A Multi-dimensional Investigation of Geography in the Americas) (Solis 2009; Solis et al. 2009).

Third, staffing policies have implicit or explicit elements of internationalization. It is often the case, for instance, that many lecturers in HE institutions in the Global South have a PhD, masters or some other form of overseas qualification. They frequently bring back and implement a different “frame of mind”, not to mention enhanced language skills. The new ideas are of course modified for local circumstances but many departments of geography have been transformed by this collective experience. Once trained to a high level, such staff are marketable and the “brain drain” to institutions in the Global North is becoming a problem in some areas of technologically sophisticated science. There are some reverse flows, for instance expatriates from Europe and North America pioneering the first phase of branch campuses in countries such as China, and there are now also a select number of world class universities in the South that have strategies of their own for international recruitment.

In the world of geography, the National University of Singapore is a leader in this regard (Kong 2007).

Fourth, and most important from our point of view in this article, there is internationalization through content. Curriculum issues have received less emphasis than student mobility and offshore courses, and in our opinion more attention should be paid to the structures of knowledge flows between academics and between institutions. Interestingly, theoretical/conceptual knowledge does not travel as far as the instrumental knowledge associated with technologies such as Geographical Information Systems and Environmental Remote Sensing. This increasingly has features of a universal geographical language, whereas the post-structuralism that has been so fashionable in theoretical human geography has less traction. The international transfer of GIS or other geographical teaching materials does not necessarily make any explicit mention of the origins of the knowledge, and does not have to be branded as such. It depends upon the cultural awareness of both sides, upon the capacity of the receiving students, and upon the flexibility of the material. Geography is more suited to this probably than, say, history and literature and also a number of the equipment-intensive laboratory sciences.

Where there is a commonality of module materials it may be possible to arrange for mutuality of assessment moderation. Familiarity with a partner university's teaching programme is certainly an advantage for an external examiner. Irrespective of any link programmes, it seems to be becoming increasingly common for universities in the Global South to have their own doctoral supervision programmes, which may be quality-controlled by overseas examiners. A thesis may be sent by post or even as an email attachment and *viva voce* PhD examinations by video conferencing or by skype are now routine. We would argue that the adoption of such technologies is a significant moment in the history of international academic relations, that in future will add flexibility to the tools of degree delivery and assessment.

Fifth, there are organizations that are monitoring and facilitating the various forms of internationalization that we have been discussing. The International Network for Learning and Teaching Geography in Higher Education was founded in 1999 and has since made an important contribution to international debate about the teaching of the subject.<sup>4</sup> The Association of American Geographers has a Centre for Global Geography Education, which started in 2003 and in 2010 a number of modules were published online.<sup>5</sup> These include detailed case studies from around the world and provide the opportunity for students from

different countries to collaborate through e-learning technologies such as blogs, wikis, and discussion boards. There is also the Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union,<sup>6</sup> and there have been several shorter run contributions, such as the Herodot global network for geography in higher education (2002-2009).<sup>7</sup> More generally, UNESCO seeks to promote international university cooperation through its UNITWIN programme.<sup>8</sup>

## **Problems**

Language is a limiting factor in internationalization but maybe not in the way that might be expected. Rather than a chaotic Tower of Babel, internationalized geography is dominated by the English language and by publications from the Anglo-America realm. Aalbers and Rossi (2009) argue that this is a hegemony that is difficult for non-native speakers to break into, although they recognise that in countries such as the Netherlands academics are obliged to publish in English in order to further their careers and that this is probably a tendency that will spread. There are limits to such arguments because it is clear for all to see that there are vigorous parallel worlds of geography in France, Germany, China and other countries, which publish in non-English journals and do not need any patronising comments from anglophones about their quality. There is a telling point, though, that because of their traditional links with the UK and because of their daily use of English in lectures, it could be said the geographers in Bangladesh, India and a number of other Commonwealth countries actually have an advantage in their positioning vis à vis their colleagues in, say, the south and east of Europe. In Italy, Spain or Greece, for instance, English is less frequently used in professional settings and resource constraints mean that English language journals and books are not always readily available.

In view of this, it is surprising perhaps that only 35.8% of international students travelling to the UK in 2010 had English as their mother tongue and only 28.6% in the USA (OECD, 2012). The proportions of native-speaking tertiary student arrivals are even lower for Italy (5.0%) and Germany (9.0%), suggesting a degree of linguistic flexibility on the part of international students that is not always recognized. By comparison, 68.5% of those students travelling to Portugal were lusophones and 65.5% of those going to Belgium had French or Flemish, indicating the presence of niche language markets.

To an extent English is becoming the international language of higher education, often by default but sometimes in a planned manner. There are now institutions in continental



Europe that are mounting postgraduate degree courses in aspects of geography where lectures and small group teaching is all in English in order to capture a part of the lucrative market. This means that there may be teaching occasions where neither the lecturers nor the students are native speakers. We wonder whether the growing use of computer software translation engines might eventually alter this linguistic balance. The quality of such automated translations was laughable at the outset a decade ago but it is improving and in time may approach a professional standard that could be used for reading relevant literature in real time. This would have a major impact for the visibility of non-English publications. Hitherto some Anglo-American geographers have simply been too busy, too lazy or too arrogant to read outside of their own language realm.

A second problem, an important practical one for internationalization, is that visa criteria have recently become more stringent as a result of security fears and in order to stem long-term immigration. In the UK, the Border Agency introduced a points-based system in 2009 that has had a discernible impact upon movement. Higher Education Institutions now have to earn their status as a Highly Trusted Sponsor in order to recruit but this has proved to be far less straightforward than expected. As a result of failing to meet the standards required by the UKBA, one university in London had this status withdrawn, with catastrophic consequences for its reputation and the likelihood of international admissions in future. 473 other UK colleges have also had their licences revoked and thousands of visas have been refused or cancelled (WES 2012). The language skills of students will in future be required at a higher level and the monitoring of academic progress will be tightened.

A third issue, this time to do with curriculum development, is that degree structures, pedagogy and assessment vary so much internationally that they amount to different ways of thinking about geography; one might even say different geographical discourses because the routes of arriving at a qualification have implicit agendas built into them. Part of this relates to the differences between semesters and terms and between modules and courses but in a sense these are just administrative details. More fundamental are issues that have been extensively debated in this journal, such as the level of interdisciplinarity that is considered desirable for a geography HE qualification; the balance between theoretical and applied knowledge; and the extent to which the student is involved in active learning. In the last case, in those institutions where seminar or project-based learning systems dominate the curriculum, it may be difficult to establish an international dialogue, or for that matter even an intra-national dialogue, with more traditional lecture-based programmes. An example of

this is the credit transfer involved in degrees provided jointly by international partners and facilitated by schemes such as the European Union's Erasmus programmes, where it is sometimes difficult to interpret the grades that students bring with them. The junior author (PJA) has had experience of examining in two Mediterranean countries where 90% is a modal mark on some courses. He vividly remembers talking to one student from the south of Europe spending some time in the UK who told him that "you can't give me a 2:1 (66%) for that essay because at home I always score in the 90s". The norms and cultures of the worlds of higher education are such that an intelligent filter is always required between different contexts.

Fourth, is geography pure or applied? We are not talking here about Mathematics or Physics but about geography. The discipline has free reign in some parts of the world, to the extent in the UK, for instance, that the human side in particular has shed some of its old core skills and goals and is becoming an indispensable part of mainstream social science. One can tell this because many of the staff employed in geography departments are now recruited from other subjects. But in a few other countries geography is losing its disciplinary identity, as evidenced by the merger of departments in Australia, or it is becoming an applied subject that deploys specific technical skills in the service of state policy or commercial profit. Again there are potential mismatches of curriculum here. As Li et al. (2007) make clear, Chinese geography in the last decade has moved into urban/rural planning, resource management and GIS. This drift into applied areas is popular with students because of the inclusion of transferrable job-related skills and so the more theoretical 'geographical sciences' did not grow commensurately. There is a similar thirst for instrumental skills worldwide, as discussed in the papers in Unwin et al. (2012).

### **Geography in Bangladesh HEIs**

Universities do not have a monopoly of geographical knowledge in Bangladesh. Because of the vast sector involved with organizing and delivering development, there are consulting research organizations, international aid institutions and NGOs that are busy doing applied geography and many of them have resources and analytical assets that are the envy of the country's HEIs. Indeed, in order to supplement their income, many university staff engage with this sector on a contract basis and, as a result, they have become familiar with new sets of research questions and methodologies. These colleagues are based in Departments of Geography and Environment, the designation used in Bangladesh's public universities, so the

disciplinary profile is more physical and more practical than is the case in many other countries. Having said that, most degrees have a mix of both human and physical geography courses, and fieldwork and dry laboratory teaching are common. Unfortunately there are shortages of equipment and any wet laboratory analysis is in facilities shared with departments such as chemistry, physics or geology.

**Table 2. Bangladeshi HE students abroad in 2010**

<b>Host country</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Host country</b>	<b>Number</b>
UK	4140	Germany	377
Australia	2656	Finland	363
USA	2596	India	345
Cyprus	2471	Saudi Arabia	264
Japan	1693	Italy	162
Malaysia	1627	Russia	144
Sweden	1146	New Zealand	107
Canada	1134	France	101
South Korea	410	Other	1091
Thailand	394		

Source: UNESCO

In Bangladesh the four-year undergraduate degree programme is followed by a one-year masters for the high achieving students but it is generally only the top one or two in each cohort who have any chance of proceeding to further overseas training. For postgraduate opportunities overseas much depends upon funding sources such as the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission. The migration streams shown in Table 2 include Bangladeshi students seeking undergraduate as well as postgraduate training. English-speaking destinations predominate and this is logical for the substantial number who will have received most of their education in English. The UK remains the principal destination but sentiment plays little part in a market driven more by fee levels, perceived difficulties with visa applications and the availability of scholarships. The fact that the UK cannot take growth in Bangladesh student numbers for granted is demonstrated by Table 3, where it is obvious that the increment has been modest by comparison with India.

**Table 3. Inbound mobility of tertiary students to UK from S. Asia**

<b>Origin</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2010</b>
Bangladesh	468	687	839	1721	2222	2817	4140
Bhutan	44	26	28	16	22	19	19
India	3112	3962	6016	14,625	19,204	25,901	38,205
Maldives	67	116	133	115	164	146	143
Nepal	145	151	197	394	518	646	1121
Pakistan	1930	2113	2161	4378	7940	9303	9754
Sri Lanka	955	1164	1491	2267	2765	3141	3904

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco>

Geography and environmental studies at Bangladesh's public universities are dominated by the oldest department, at the University of Dhaka (founded 1948), and one founded the year before independence, Jahangirnagar University (1970). Six other state universities [Rajshahi, Begum Rokeya, Chittagong, Jagannath, Shahjalal, National] teach geography and the inspiration for their degree structures and content is generally speaking from the UK, USA and Canada, with a wide range of topics on offer and systems of assessment and blocks of teaching – terms or semesters – that are familiar across the English-speaking world. In addition, there are presently 51 private universities, likely to rise to 70 in the near future.<sup>9</sup> These are commercial organizations that are staffed in some cases principally by part-time lecturers from the public universities and research institutes. For these private institutions the environmental sciences are more saleable than geography.

The potential advantages of the internationalization of curriculum development from the Bangladesh point of view are as follows:

- Potential pedagogic advances through the consideration of different styles of teaching, learning and assessment methods.
- Knowledge updates as a result of exposure to library facilities, for instance e-journals and new books.
- Skill enhancement, through instrumental methodologies such as GIS and remote sensing. There is the prospect of mobile information technologies, such as tablets, recording

devices and global positioning systems becoming more affordable in the near term, which will release unmet potential.

- Systems development, for instance the managerial frameworks for the quality monitoring of modules and the assurance of assessment standards and their stability and comparability.

While its economic growth in recent years amounts to a success story, the polity and governance structures of Bangladesh have been subject to critical scrutiny. In planning the project set out below the participants wished to avoid both the potential logistical problems we have set out above for international HE contacts in general and the structural biases experienced in Bangladesh. Most of all, our reading of the postcolonial literature made us sensitive to charges of intellectual tourism (Roman 2003), of conceptual dependence, and of mindless technology transfer. We went into the process with our eyes open to the dangers of reproducing inappropriate curricula and of the disempowerment that can result.

### **Case study: the INSPIRE Programme**

INSPIRE was a British Council funded project (2008/9-12/13) that sought to strengthen ties between UK HEIs and their equivalents in Central and South Asia, and to trial possible models for future co-operation. The eligible countries were Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The funding was up to a maximum of £30,000 a year per project, sufficient for activities such as international travel and the purchase of modest material resources. Each country had its own priority subject areas. In the case of Bangladesh they were Environment and Climate Change; Fine Arts, Theatre and Fashion; Renewable and Alternative Energy; English Language with a focus on Teaching Methodology; and Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering. Ultimately INSPIRE had a total of 55 active partnerships in the five countries, involving over 100 institutions.

Because of the timescale, no overall evaluation of INSPIRE has yet been possible but a potential theoretical framework for such an assessment might be contingency theory. In this ‘there is no single best organizational orientation and no universalistic organizational choices which result in optimal outcomes in every situation’ (Ambos and Ambos 2009, 2). Work on organizational management indicates that the alignment of subunits is a key to their ‘fit’ in the system and their potential for successful sharing of knowledge.

We sought a postcolonial dimension in which the known contingencies were accounted for and would not be to the disadvantage of any of the participants. With the help

of the British Council funding, all parties were able to make their human and physical resources available free of charge. It is notable that in much of the internationalization literature the subject of monetization is under discussion because travelling students are paying fees or curriculum transfer is a matter of franchising packages of knowledge and assessment.

Our case study is different. It was a link established between the Geography and Anthropology Departments of Durham University in the UK, the Departments of Geography and Environment of the University of Dhaka and Jahangirnagar University, and the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences of the Independent University Bangladesh. This started with a trial year in 2009 and went on to a Strategic Award for three years, ending in 2013. From the outset, raising the capacity of teaching and learning was part of the INSPIRE brief and so this represented a relatively rare opportunity in a funding landscape biased towards research. The Bangladesh partners had engaged with a number of research partners over the four decades since independence but we are not aware of any previous initiative offering funding for teacher exchange and curriculum development.

The first rationale for a multi-institution link programme focusing on curriculum development was that Bangladeshi teachers feel the need from time to time to refresh their familiarity with international trends in geography in higher education. Many have been abroad for extended periods for postgraduate training and they may have been employed there as teaching assistants, in which case they will have been actively exposed to contemporary debates about content and pedagogy. But returning to an underfunded environment can lead to isolation and a lack of challenge, so the INSPIRE opportunity was very welcome. Maybe the technologies that we mentioned in the first part of this paper, such as e-journals and skype, will soon bring Bangladeshi HEIs into the mainstream but for the time being the chance to visit the UK to see geography and anthropology teaching in action was greatly valued.

Second, despite being in the front line of the potentially negative effects of climate change, there is a chronic shortage of the applied skills needed for planning and mitigation and of the research needed to build an adequate knowledge base. The country is also challenged by a broad range of environmental hazards: riverine floods, cyclones, marine storm surges, sea-level rise, landslides, earthquakes, unpredictable shifts in the monsoon regime, and also the contamination of groundwater with arsenic. Bangladesh HEIs have many good researchers, often trained at top universities in the Global North, but they are hampered

by a lack of resources, such as equipment of an international standard and also teaching materials. This is a source of frustration and INSPIRE's specific focus on environment and climate change at least gave a chance to highlight a crucial need within the national context. Two conferences were organized at the end of the project to share outcomes with Bangladesh colleagues generally.

Durham University has had links with the former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, from 1968. Since then over 20 research degrees have been awarded to Bangladeshis, mainly doctorates and a number of taught and research masters. This is one of the largest international cohorts in the history of geography at Durham. The link programme therefore had the advantage that the organizers already knew each other either directly, or indirectly through intermediaries.

Duan et al.'s (2010) survey of the literature on knowledge transfer showed that the top factors in success were – among actors – openness, prior experience and knowledge, trust, and motivation; in terms of context it was degree of cultural difference, relationship, and social capital; while other factors included language and the nature and content of the knowledge being transferred. We felt from the outset that we were fortunate in having advantages in most if not all of these dimensions. Our prior social capital undoubtedly assisted with the speedy negotiations at a distance that were necessary to meet application deadlines and the reservoir of goodwill was drawn upon from time to time when issues arose during the four years of the programme. Long-term relationships of this type, in which trust is established and reproduced over a number of years, require effort on all sides. Activities and personnel may change as funding ebbs and flows but the path of mutual benefit has to be there for all to see. The partnership on this occasion was about curriculum development. In the past it has been about postgraduate training, and in future it is hoped that research will come to the fore.

There were 22 staff visits from Bangladesh to Durham and 6 in the other direction. Durham provided access for the visitors to module materials such as specifications that outline aims and objectives, activity hours and indicative reading. All of these were available for the three year undergraduate degree programmes (BA/BSc) and the one year taught Masters in Risk. It was possible to attend lectures and talk to module convenors about planning, pedagogy and assessment. The Bangladeshi geographers were familiar with most elements on show but appreciated the opportunity to see teaching and learning that is specifically linked to cutting-edge research. Given the differences in the higher education

systems of the two countries, it is not possible or desirable to transfer whole modules but exposure to a resource-intensive context was an inspiration.

One could argue that once purged of imperial overtones and where possible of the asymmetry of resources, networks remain exceptionally useful for geographers in the Global South. The path smoothing implications of shared language and mutual cultural understanding are important for knowledge transfer/sharing. In an increasingly interconnected world there will be a choice of higher education partners, as is already the case in Bangladesh with regard to the hundreds/thousands of foreign NGOs offering development assistance beyond the state system.

The University of Dhaka's Department of Geography and Environment had originally intended to revise three courses and introduce three new ones. The collective impact of the eight visits to Durham was such, however, that five streams of the Master of Science curriculum were rethought, with a total of eleven new courses introduced and fourteen updated. About 80 students a year benefit from these changes and they will be able to choose from new offerings such as: "Palaeo-Geomorphology and Palaeo-Climatology", "Introduction to Natural Hazards, Disasters and Disaster Management", "Vulnerability and Risk Assessment" and "Climate Change and Human Adaptation". While these are not unique in Bangladesh, they represent an important enhancement at masters level of the nation's training capacity in environment-facing topics.

Staff from the Department of Geography and Environment, Jahangirnagar University, made eleven visits to Durham. As a result they revised nine existing courses and devised five new ones. Two of these are at third year undergraduate level of the Bachelor of Science and two in the fourth year; nine were in the taught postgraduate degree of Master of Science; and one in the programme of Master of Philosophy. Each of the undergraduate cohorts has 75 students, the taught masters 65, the MPhil 8, and the PhD 4, so the total number affected by these changes per academic year will be 179. The courses include "Geography of Natural Hazards", "Geography of Food and Food Security", "Geography of Hazard and Environment", all new to Jahangirnagar, and a revision of "Disaster Management". These changes closely map the intentions of the project.

Although no curricula were changed in Durham, the Department of Geography and the University's Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience benefited from the participation of the Bangladeshi visitors in lecture discussion, in teaching and research seminars, and in informal discussion with Durham staff and students. By way of example, Dr Hassan gave a talk on



“Disease in South Asia: Impact of Climate Change” which was attended by students from the Risk Masters, who as a result had a valuable case study for contemplation. Likewise the visitors from Durham to Dhaka lectured and had time to discuss possible future research collaboration. The whole ethos of the programme is perhaps encapsulated by Peter Atkins’ trip to the Sundarbans (mangrove forest) in the Bay of Bengal where he learned a great deal about the fieldwork-based teaching strategy of his partners. British geographers have a great deal to learn from this kind of intensive, dedicated but time-consuming pedagogy.

The next step is for ideas gathered about hazards, risk and resilience to be applied in the all too real world of disasters in Bangladesh. While NGOs there now have a breadth of experience, their staff do not have much opportunity to explore academic theories and applied research. It is hoped to offer short courses, maybe for a qualification such as a certificate or diploma in HRR studies. Not only will this provide opportunities to support the career advancement of the graduates but it should also enhance the quality of service to victims. Such continuing professional development in a higher education setting would be a very positive development in this country which is likely to be subject to greater future challenges as the consequences of climate change unfold.

### **Evaluation and conclusion**

Contingency theory suggests that knowledge transfer often fails because of a dissonance between context and configuration (Hutzschenreuter and Listner 2007). Most of the relevant work has been done on the stickiness of knowledge transfer in transnational corporations (Li and Hsieh 2009) but the results are also relevant to HE, where similar limitations exist to the circumstances that can be controlled by the parties. The friction of physical, linguistic and cultural distance are less now in the era of knowledge globalization but the context-specific nature of tacit knowledge means that careful targeting is still required (Ambos and Ambos 2009). In the more specific case of HE curriculum transfer, the available literature indicates a need to consider learning styles and tensions between culturally embedded notions of authority and critical pedagogy. There is also the issue of voice and agency in the postcolonial sense of the reinterpretation of knowledge by the recipients for their own purposes (Kanu 2005).

According to a commentator quoted in Aydarova (2013, 297), “transplanting wholesale Western education models to the UAE does not work”. No, of course not; whoever thought it would? In our case the focus was at the level of particular modules mediated

through the experience and choice of individual Bangladeshi staff members. The choice was theirs and the implementation is theirs according to the local circumstances of their degree programme and the resources at their disposal. All of the Durham material has been modified for local consumption but it did provide inspiration, ideas, and structures from the short visits that might otherwise have taken years to access and know about in depth. In our view this is empowerment from a relationship with the right shape.

We are not advocating that universities in Bangladesh should be shoppers in a global supermarket of ideas that are indiscriminately overlain on long-established systems. Rather, we see curricula as fluid according to local circumstances and for us multiple partnerships are resource hubs to be drawn upon as and when appropriate. This obviously depends upon funding in the early stages and upon personal contacts and goodwill in the second phase. Both of these are fragile and may be withdrawn or renegotiated but in our view they are worth the initial groundwork and the maintenance effort. Once ties are broken they are costly to re-establish, particularly for partners in the Global South.

It is the opinion of some that a number of pressures, including the at-times febrile political situation, have led to declining standards in Bangladeshi HEIs. Our argument is that overseas contacts such as those fostered by the Inspire programme on the contrary help to drive up standards for both staff and students. Our experience was almost entirely positive and we look forward to further engagement among the parties in future.

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### **Notes**

1. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2012/10/02/the-politics-of-international-education/>;  
<http://www.hesa.ac.uk>.
2. [http://www.obhe.ac.uk/what\\_we\\_do/Going\\_Global.7e.26\\_March.\\_Lasanowski.pdf](http://www.obhe.ac.uk/what_we_do/Going_Global.7e.26_March._Lasanowski.pdf);  
<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20120802130423710&query=fees>
3. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/>;  
<http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2012>.
4. <http://www.geog.canterbury.ac.nz/inlt/>
5. <http://www.aag.org/cs/cgge>
6. <http://www.igu-cge.org/>

7. <http://www.herodot.net/index.html>
8. <http://www.unesco.org/en/university-twinning-and-networking/inter-university-cooperation/>
9. A full list is provided by the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh:  
<http://www.ugc.gov.bd>.

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