

**Hedging bets: exploring transnational higher education
capitalism as illustrated by two Arab Gulf approaches**

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Abstract

This article contributes to the emerging theoretical construct of what has been called 'transnational academic capitalism', characterised by the blurring of traditional boundaries between public, private, local, regional and international, and between market-driven and critically transformative higher education visions. After a critical discussion of the issues, we examine how these issues are reflected in higher education policy in the Arab Gulf. Drawing on public data and documents from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, we ask: What kinds of capital are being traded? By and for whom? And what is the relationship between higher education competition, governance, and the public good? We find contradictory trends, which we see as strategic ambivalence pointing to country-specific readings of similar regional markets and attempts to hedge bets between rival forms of apparent capital. The exploration offers a counterpoint to more widely cited examples, hereby helping to shape new paradigmatic, 'glocalised' understandings of this field.

Issues and debates about higher education capital & capitalism

The phrase 'academic capitalism' is well used and habitually defined in terms of institutional responses to shortfalls in state funding. Universities compete to appeal to various markets, with institutions, staff and projects required to be self-sustaining. Accountability is shaped in a particular multi-stakeholder way that requires a case to be made for the economic benefit of every enterprise with risks to be avoided. Seen as a 'regime', what is termed academic capitalism entails specific modes of administration, public-private collaboration and the use of intermediating networks (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). These modes of operating are frequently likened to New Public Management (NPM), with an ideology that renders academic relations indistinguishable from business ones in the normative preoccupation with production, consumption and efficiency. These are familiar phenomena. However, it has been recently argued that rapid paradigm shifting requires a new theory of 'transnational academic capitalism', to account for a situation where practices, networks and normative frameworks are simultaneously trans-national yet while the nation-state "is not a natural container of these dynamic social relations" it is nonetheless a player (Kaupinnen, 2013:14).

In fact, there are already several bodies of commentary and analysis attempting just that. While 'global higher education' discourses tend towards the descriptive, the rampant internationalisation of higher education in the Arab Gulf has prompted a several strands of 'transnational higher education' analysis. The present article draws on this as well as 'academic capitalism' literature to contribute to the formation of a theory that we will call '*higher education* capitalism' rather than 'academic capitalism', reflecting its institutional and policy (rather than the distinctive knowledge-production) focus. The

emerging dimensions of the phenomenon are illustrated through a discussion of capital relations between higher education, individuals, states and region in two distinctive higher education sectors in the Arab Gulf, which also draw on a range of publicly available policy documents.

Understanding the nature of higher education capitalism requires us to consider who the stakeholders are; the role of the nation-state in this is obscure. One premise is that

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3 'global higher education' is "simply ... a trading environment" (Marginson, 2007:307) for
4 nation states, a perspective that aligns well with the 'competition fetish' thesis, which
5 explains how states are swept up through fear of being left behind into competing in
6 games that may not serve their long-term interests, in a political context of interstate
7 rivalry (Naidoo, 2011a). This competitive scenario has formed the basis of an
8 established critique of globalisation, which it is said, "foregrounds education in specific
9 ways that attempt to harness education systems to the rapid and competitive growth and
10 transmission of technologies and knowledge linked to the national competitiveness of
11 nations within the global economy," (Ozga and Lingard, 2007:70), although some have
12 pointed to 'internationalisation' as a better way of describing this than 'globalisation'
13 (S.Robertson, 2009:66). Others have argued that globalisation has actually resulted in
14 globally *shared*, or at least 'flowing', capital (Marginson, 2007), a phenomenon attributed
15 to 'liberation' from the limits imposed by state governance (Robinson, 2004). And a third
16 perspective focuses on the continued role of the nation-state as the realm of
17 governance, managing and fine-tuning to local contexts a global policy and capital field.
18 It is this third perspective that best fits R.Robertson's 'glocalization' thesis, which
19 describes how global processes do not homogenise, but instead through contact with
20 local cultures create a greater range of possibilities for reaction and regeneration
21 (R.Robertson, 1992&1995).

22 The most helpful working definitions of higher education capitalism centre on the
23 meaning of 'capital' as its main component, yet the term is not unambiguous, as some
24 have pointed out (Enders and Jongbloed, 2007). While a range of 'for profit'
25 developments appear to be making higher education an investment commodity, or a
26 "tradable service" (Lane, 2012:8), by student-consumers, governments and private
27 investors as much as higher education institutions (HEIs), what it is less clear in both
28 individual cases, and generally, is whose and what this capital actually is. Most
29 definitions obscure the conflation of two alternative models of capital that have
30 dominated educational discourse: universities seen as businesses whose *ideas* and
31 innovations drive the economy, in contrast to the older vision of higher education for
32 *human* capital. Furthermore, there are at least two variants of '*human* capital' theory:
33 personal socio-economic advantage depending on personal investment, or the nation's
34 economic viability depending on its investment in human capital. Exploiting the further
35 ambiguity in the term (as capital, or in a normative, value-laden sense, or simply as
36 highly ranked), others such as Marginson and Naidoo have tended instead to use the
37 term 'goods'.

38 Drilling down in to the range of potential meanings of higher educational capital
39 inevitably involves looking at its markets; in terms of capital *benefit* at least, there are
40 several distinct but overlapping ones. From a student or parent perspective, the higher
41 education 'market' appears currently to be dominated by credentialism and particularly
42 increased preoccupation with employment qualifications. In the UK, for example, this
43 assumption, that higher education was a catalyst for individual economic gain, that "The
44 value of a university education is the income it enables you to earn minus the cost of
45 acquiring that education." (Collini, 2013), provided political justification for both the start
46 of higher education economisation in the 1990s and the recent massive fees hike in
47 England. Yet not far under the surface of such policy was also a shared
48 government~business view of higher education as a catalyst for national economic
49 development in the pursuit of created wealth in our shifting global knowledge economy,
50 the government's version distinguished by attempts to insert a societal slant: "The non-
51 economic benefits of HE are over-rated... universities exist to enable the British
52 economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid
53 process of global change" (Clarke, 2003). Intrinsic to each of these markets, business,
54 social or individual, there is of course the reputational one, "itself an identifiable market –
55 one that matters and has material effects." (Marginson, 2011).

56 But these are not the only market dimensions. Since markets are subject to change,
57 working out who benefits from higher education also requires us to look closely at the
58 other aspects of purpose or capital that are *intrinsic* to the sector. Higher education's
59 role has always veered uncomfortably between upskilling economically competitive
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3 populations, transmitting 'official' knowledge and promoting independent enlightened
4 thought, and today these strands of thought still compete in critically slanted higher
5 education rhetorics about both 'the public good' and individual transformation. Thus the
6 critical-ideational dimension of individual higher education capital is concerned with
7 "...developing general qualities of a personal and social kind as well as those of an
8 intellectual kind." (Nightingale & O'Neil, 1994:53), leading to increased levels of wisdom,
9 life skills and in turn wellbeing (Dolton and Vignoles, 1999:105). Whereas the 'public
10 good' role is found in the balance between collective economic, cultural and
11 epistemological capitals, the link between economic growth, knowledge production and
12 wellbeing.

13 The word 'balance' should raise alarm bells: 'public good' is complicated, in the sense
14 that both links and divisions between higher education, 'employability' and social
15 wellbeing are problematic. While universities everywhere are shackled in an
16 unprecedented way to rapidly changing labour markets, the changes to these markets
17 are so rapid that training young people for jobs which may not be there by the time they
18 have graduated can seem short-sighted. The link is further undermined by persistent
19 graduate unemployment, difficulties in establishing direct correlations between higher
20 education and how well students are actually equipped for work, and inconsistency
21 between employers' statements about what they want and actual recruitment policies.
22 Yet it is also argued that *divisions* between the employment and social aspects of public
23 good are artificial and misleading. On one hand, the forces of globalisation have seen
24 the modernist citizenship education project give way, rhetorically at least, to new
25 citizenship education agendas; 'global', 'active', 'new' or 'alternative' citizenship
26 education is supposed to prepare students for life in a borderless world, promote the
27 exercise of an informed voice that respects difference, challenge hegemony, and
28 emphasize social justice and enlightened political participation (Rimmerman, 1998;
29 Bleiklie, 2000; the World Universities Forum; the Political Studies Association). Yet the
30 modernist link between workplace skills and social inclusion is still a major focus of
31 assimilationist arguments about how to address social tensions with European
32 Commission publications, for instance, emphasizing the importance of an up-to-date
33 skills base for both employability and active citizenship. The point can be applied
34 equally to different types of social exclusion and inequality – class, migration and
35 gender-related. In relations to the last of these in particular, it has been consistently
36 explained how the ideational and practical aspects of education's liberating function are
37 intertwined (Lister, 1997; Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003).

38 Yet there is a third conception of public good, which provides a sharper challenge to
39 simplistic attempts to link higher education to its achievement. Thus higher education is,
40 "not only ... a public good in itself, but because it exists to ask what constitutes the
41 public good" (Nixon, 2011:1). This view sees universities' most critical role as helping to
42 determine public policy, and though rarely addressed by policy makers, it clearly thrives
43 in intellectuals' outrage at the marginalising of universities' roles as "center(s) of critique"
44 (Giroux, 2014:4). It is a view that comes into its own in relation to findings that the
45 'widening access' higher education agenda has actually increased social stratification, in
46 terms of access (*which* universities poorer students go to), experience, and socio-
47 economic outcomes (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). Thus by deploying classic Marxian
48 arguments that social mobility in the form of striving for the positional advantage that is
49 the ideological core of widening access is not actually a recipe for a stable society: "...
50 everyone knows that some time or other the crash must come, but every one hopes that
51 it may fall on the head of his neighbour ..." (Marx, 1887, Vol. I, Ch. 10, Section 5, p.296),
52 universities can themselves challenge assumptions that competition is intrinsically good.

53 The complex internationalism of higher education, 'international' in terms of both
54 providers and beneficiaries, adds an extra layer to the nature of higher education
55 capitalism. While it is not possible to generalise with accuracy about what global capital
56 the typical international student seeks, this seems to involve some mixture of socio-
57 economic capital upon return home in the form of prestigious qualifications and
58 workplace skills, and cross-cultural capital in the form of a broadening of outlook
59 (Noddings, 2005). Mastery of a foreign language can serve both functions. Such
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3 acquisition is seen as especially important for emerging middle classes in developing
4 countries striving for “positional advantage” (Bates, 2012), though it can also be due to a
5 lack of jobs at home.

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7 International student perspectives on higher educational capital are appreciated by
8 providers, who simply provide on a demand-supply model in an increasing array of
9 forms including educational hubs, branch campuses and public-private partnerships.
10 However, it has been noted (Knight and Morshidi, 2011) that such labels obscure their
11 very real differences in mission, ideology, function, priority and outcomes between these
12 forms of provision, which as others have also pointed out in relation to the international
13 schools phenomenon remain local matters. Neither is investment in the international
14 market limited to short-term economic return everywhere. Naidoo (2011b), for instance,
15 notes that China’s and India’s rationales for investing in higher education are not
16 restricted to economic return but to two-way strategic and ideological transfer. Mok sees
17 the South-East Asia form of this enterprise as a way of seeking to ensure ‘world class
18 status’ and thus influence, and have explained how national governments in South-East
19 Asia have re-cast rather than relinquish their roles in governing this international trade
20 (Mok, 2008; Deem, Mok & Lucas, 2008). India provides another example of this longer-
21 term approach, publicly rejecting immediate income generation as a prime expansion
22 objective, instead citing the desire for a stake in educating and socialising the most
23 educated generation ever on the assumption that today’s graduates will be people of
24 influence tomorrow (BBC R4, 2014).

25 There is a sense, however, in which discussion of motives is beside the point as the
26 result is the same: the overall increasing adoption of a business orientation to higher
27 education policy-making, with universities becoming non-distinctive players in a
28 demand-supply free-market ‘service industry’ (Reich, 2004). (Inter-)nationally and
29 institutionally, higher educational capitalism is increasingly ‘for-profit’ (Slaughter and
30 Rhoades, 2004; Shepherd, 2008). In 2010, the UK Secretary of State for Business,
31 Innovation and Skills told English vice chancellors that the government wanted to
32 encourage private universities not subsidised by the state, and that in the new economic
33 vision it would be acceptable for universities to go bankrupt: “It would be similar to
34 banks” (The Guardian, 2010). Thus across the world, these approaches to capital flow
35 have begun to cast higher education “..... not just as a means for supporting a nation’s
36 competitive advantage, but as a competitive advantage in its own right” (Lane and
37 Johnstone, 2012:7). The increasing privatisation of this enterprise thus means that
38 private investors are not only capital providers but also beneficiaries. Online ‘start-ups’
39 in the US are discussed in unashamedly entrepreneurial terms, with plans to build a
40 ‘virtual Harvard’ tipped as “the biggest seed bet in the Valley in a long time” (Griffin,
41 2012). And in the UK the HEFCE-sponsored ‘Legal Guide for UK Universities’ started a
42 tranche of such guides to gather together “all the issues that need to be considered by a
43 university serious about doing business abroad” (UK Higher Education International
44 Unit, 2009).

45 The extent to which such privatisation is incompatible with any claim to public, collective,
46 good or capital is contested. Kaupinnen’s view that “the academic capitalist regime co-
47 exists with the public good regime” (2013:5) is reminiscent of Marginson’s arguments
48 about the need to revise habitual “statist” distinctions between public and private;
49 ‘ownership’ is different from product, he argues: “The ownership of higher education can
50 be exclusively public, or mixed, or exclusively private. But almost everywhere in the
51 world, what is produced is a variable mix of public and private goods” (Marginson,
52 2007:316), or “public goods” and “status competition” (Marginson, 2014). However, the
53 more widespread view is that the economisation of higher education undermines its
54 public good role, particularly in relation to its critical function. Giroux goes further with a
55 Marxian description of the neo-liberal policy turn as “the latest stage of predatory
56 capitalism”, aimed at “restoring class power and consolidating the rapid concentration of
57 capital”, which is partly achieved through the desire of paying students to fit in, to join the
58 ranks of those who have (Giroux, 2014).

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3 Privatisation especially challenges the sort of governance that 'public good' requires.
4 Although it has been persuasively argued that marketization has actually turned what
5 passes for educational governance into the business of simply managing data (Ozga,
6 2011), the term 'governance' has traditionally denoted a lot more than this, including the
7 balancing of interests and setting out of values and standards. In a transnational
8 context, standards are increasingly being seen as international, while values are seen as
9 local matters and the policy challenge is to balance these – whether they are compatible
10 (Shams and Huisman, 2012) or in fundamental opposition (Lane and Kinser, 2011;
11 Altbach, 2011). Mok's is not the only account of how the local dimension of higher
12 education policy and markets has become one of governing with an eye on local needs
13 and values, although others have rejected the sort of 'internationalism' or global-local
14 interface that has "global pressures and local effects" (Ozga and Lingard, 2007:65), with
15 the scope for local input limited to allocating values within externally delineated
16 frameworks and statements of purpose (Taylor and Henry, 2007:110). And though
17 UNESCO has been attempting to regulate transnational higher education since 2000,
18 regulatory distance has continued to be identified, along with socio-cultural distance, as
19 the biggest challenge for transnational higher education governance Shams and
20 Huisman, 2012), as exporters struggle to fit international standards to local cultures,
21 needs and the quality of local school graduates (Altbach, 2010; Gonzalez et al, 2008).
22 Neither the prioritisation of major stakeholder interest nor the acceptance of institutional
23 bankruptcy helps address these challenges.

24 In fact, the rapid re-configuration of geo-political frames of reference, with state-
25 embedded and disembedded stakeholders, markets and networks makes it harder to
26 know precisely who this 'public' is. On one hand, Kauppinen's 'soft globalisation' take
27 on the continued role of nation-states as well as Naidoo's inter-state rivalry thesis
28 (2011b) seem to jar with the 'new regionalism of higher education' thesis (Yepes, 2006).
29 In the mid-2000s, educational policy regions were being presented as a cornerstone of
30 educational globalisation and nation-states seemed to be giving way to supranational
31 frameworks of governance and capital stakeholder networks (Breslin, Higgot and
32 Rosamund, 2002). Probably the most well-known regionalist project was the
33 establishment in 1999 in Bologna of plans for a European Higher Education Area
34 (EHEA) with standardised systems, governance and degree structures across signatory
35 countries; along with other regional consortia like ASEAN, the EHA has been a main
36 UNESCO policy actor. The framework was envisaged as key to an imagined collective
37 European identity; agreeing a framework, shared mechanisms and spaces for drawing
38 together existing systems, policies and traditions was intended to lead to shared values,
39 rhetoric and actual collective weight that could make economic ties work (S.Robertson,
40 2008).

41 However, the aim of 'real' regional education policy-making has been undermined not
42 only by simultaneous invocation of the principle of subsidiarity, for instance in the
43 Maastricht Treaty itself, but practically by a mixture of factors that have meant that policy
44 and framing discourses continue to be far more country-specific. That central
45 'glocalization' tenet, residual cultural pluralism, is most often cited for the failure of the
46 Lisbon Treaty's aspirations, giving the lie that 'regions' are all about economics. There
47 are three aspects to such pluralistic objections. First, internationalisation imposes
48 values, standards and monolithic paradigms that are not always appropriate (Pring,
49 2002), with indigenous systems cast as deficient and judged according to how receptive
50 they are to the exporting country's values and priorities. Second, Anglocentric
51 processes result in the loss of local cultures and linguistic functionality as well as
52 imposing an unfair burden on non-native speakers (Mackinnon et al, 2003). Third, there
53 is concern about how far standardisation can meet the demands of different economies
54 and professional structures (Alessio and Watkins, 2009). These factors are among "the
55 negative consequences of privatisation" that have driven calls to "bring the state back in"
56 in China (Mok, 2012).

57 On a more pragmatic level transnational standards, even if appropriate, are hard to
58 determine and control and regional frameworks can feel like artificial superimpositions
59 over national, sub-national or even extra-national capital markets. Despite the Bologna
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3 process' ideal of building 'European' capital, the structures created by transnational
4 markets appear to have ensured for the state a more substantial role than this in
5 shaping policy. For one, transnational privatisation does not provide a stable source of
6 income for either institutions or states, to the extent that the sources of higher education
7 investment are still largely national and policy follows money, competitive projects will be
8 driven by the need for short-term economic return to state investment. And as the
9 labour secretary in President Clinton's administration pointed out (Reich, 2004), fickle
10 global investors will go where they can get the highest return on investment – regardless
11 of regional policy frameworks. Hence Naidoo's rather more statist interpretation of
12 Mok's explanation for China's knowledge-as-capital ambitions (Naidoo, 2011b:43).

13 Finally, regionalism is also undermined by the fact that regional boundaries are not
14 clearly defined – at least not with any stability. In Knight and Morshidi's (2011) attempt
15 to construct a regional 'typology' of higher education hubs, what is most significant is
16 that their 'regional' framework gives way to focus on individual countries that don't
17 actually have that much in common in the terms discussed with their immediate
18 neighbours. And the most persuasive exposition of the 'new regionalism' are persuasive
19 only when these frameworks for governance or sharing are balanced by the smaller,
20 *sub*-national, autonomous units that bestow community and identity (Breslin, Higgot and
21 Rosamund, 2002). It is in acknowledgement of both localism and continued nation-state
22 agency (the state is the *only* collective player in Mok's (2012) discussion of China's
23 alternative to privatisation), that even the strongest exponents of the regionalisation
24 thesis also discuss ways in which this is a much 'softer' process, either as disembedded
25 networking or even structured policy sharing, than was initially envisaged (S.Robertson,
26 2009).

27 In an intrinsically flawed regionalisation project, an alternative to regional capital
28 acquisition or even regionally structured governance or policy forums is to see trans-
29 national policy and knowledge sharing in terms of structural and isomorphic 'network
30 pressures' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). 'Global model diffusion' – "normative,
31 encompassing voluntary elements of emulation learning and imitation, but increasingly
32 with diffusion of powerful models becoming more heavily and structurally constraining
33 and 'involuntary' as a consequence of the sheer weight of existing model adopters"
34 (King, 2011:27&28) – is a process most often applied to the normative modernisation of
35 developing *societies* by dominant ones. But King also applies this model to the 'for-
36 profit' race, discussing the 'high strategic force' of rankings, "and the associated
37 processes of surveillance and normalization to show how rankings alter perceptions"
38 (King, 2011:33). The most coercive element of rankings is their self-referential nature,
39 where competition is defined in terms of the 'network game' (King, 2011:27). If the
40 reputational competition is a game, it follows that to keep competing you have to keep
41 re-defining the market(s). It is a perspective that further underscores the interstate
42 rivalry thesis, with globalisation becoming more clearly "simply a trading environment"
43 (Marginson, 2007:307).

44 So there may well be a need for a more precise theory to account for capital
45 construction and exchange in a situation where such roles, purpose of interests are at
46 least complex and changeable (Kaupinnen, 2013). The present contribution to this
47 project now draws on a range of sources (including public, mainly government, reports
48 and strategy documents published in English, as well as secondary studies) from
49 Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to illustrate their interestingly 'glocalised' approaches to higher
50 education capitalism. Our analysis is helped by the contextual knowledge gained from a
51 combined fourteen years of experience working in the higher education sectors of the
52 Gulf and on UK-based conversations with Saudi students.

53 54 **Higher education capitalism in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia**

55 Despite longstanding mechanisms and cultures of sharing, there are diverse approaches
56 to higher education capitalism both between and within the Gulf states. While Qatar and
57 the UAE are the most high-profile states in terms of internationalisation enterprises,
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3 Bahrain and Saudi Arabia represent more complex, rapidly changing and multi-layered
4 approaches. Bahrain is a very small country, relatively poor among these states, with a
5 cosmopolitan history but home to longstanding sectarian and 'pro-democracy' protest
6 grounded in equally longstanding economic inequalities. Saudi Arabia is much larger,
7 richer, with a bigger population, and more culturally conservative with a more successful
8 record of suppressing political protest. Half a century ago, the Arab Gulf states including
9 Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were a long way behind other Arab countries in development
10 terms. But the advent of oil revenues during the 1950s and 1960s that turned many of
11 these states into *rentier* or distributive economies also brought the need for local higher
12 education sectors to supply both infrastructural and symbolic support. Most HEIs were
13 established through outside involvement in the forms of consultancy, expatriate
14 employment and, in the early days, direct funding. Both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were
15 early pioneers of higher education in the Gulf, with state-run training establishments
16 designed to meet workforce needs, in Bahrain's case achieved only with consultancy
17 and financing from Britain and its Gulf neighbours while Saudi Arabia was able to rely
18 more heavily on local sources.

19
20 Across the Gulf today, conservative systems of governance sit side-by-side massive
21 expenditure on higher education, rapid internationalisation, free-market economies and
22 huge numbers of highly educated and literate women. The majority of residents in most
23 Gulf states are now foreign nationals. Saudi Arabia has twenty-eight public universities
24 and nine private universities (though there are estimates of well over a hundred HEIs of
25 different sorts), while Bahrain has seventeen universities or university colleges, most
26 with some sort of private backing. Links between higher education's social roles and
27 shifting government priorities, whether ideological or workforce oriented, have been
28 relatively tight. The main higher education agenda is expansion, in order to meet
29 workforce needs, indigenise the professions and meet the demand for higher education.
30 This has been addressed through a proliferation of university 'start-ups' and 'branch
31 campuses'. These are established through personal networking with private foreign
32 providers mostly from the US, who are sponsored by local business and receive
33 government licenses – a novel example of public-private partnership.

34
35 In this context, academic capitalism in the region has three important characteristics.
36 First, 'development' is seen overwhelmingly in terms of increase – of outside investment,
37 number of institutions and number of graduates – assumed to be key to such
38 development as if the links between these were not problematic. Second, governments
39 have bought wholesale into the ideology and practice of selling higher education as if it
40 were real estate; it is widely said to be 'recession-proof'. Third, there has been a
41 tendency towards very light governance in terms of agreed purpose, public good, or
42 public ownership. But there is tension between these phenomena and higher
43 education's traditional role in the region as mediator of social and political
44 consciousness, even though compared with other Arab countries there has been
45 relatively little transformation of Gulf universities into centres of political resistance
46 (Findlow, 2008, 2012).

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48 The interplay of regional and nation-state forms of governance in the Gulf is different
49 from the European model. On one hand, higher education in the Arab Gulf has had the
50 dual function as symbol of state power or generosity and venue for consciousness-
51 raising, with the *rentier* and 'developmental' roles of higher education having the function
52 of raising citizens' awareness of their relationship with the state (Findlow, 2012). On the
53 other hand, in contrast to the pluralistic histories that have impeded EU cultural
54 integration, higher education policy across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),
55 established in 1981 to safeguard the security of the newly independent Gulf nations, is
56 influenced by still porous state boundaries as well as shared culture. Consequently and
57 also in contrast to other models of supposed regionalism, the GCC has long functioned
58 as a networking forum facilitating governance, policy sharing and national capital
59 exchange. There are well established intergovernmental higher education 'bureaus',
60 'organisations' and 'councils', a structural blueprint attributable to the lateness of state
control over the sector along with economic and political independence. As well as
being signatories to the Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization

(ALECSO), policy in Gulf countries has been monitored and mediated by the Arab Bureau of Education for Gulf States (ABEGS) since it was created in 1970 in order to facilitate Gulfwide cooperation over student and faculty exchange. Regional cooperation in the form of successive ABEGS plans included steps toward creating joint universities during the 1970s and 1980s of joint universities. Yet this cooperation has always fallen short of the sorts of formally inscribed shared principles and mechanisms that drove the Bologna process.

The extent to which higher education is seen as a 'public good' or investment commodity reflects simultaneously held yet conflicting constructions of prestige. Though most Gulf constitutions stipulate the right to 'free' higher education for eligible school leavers, demand outstrips the ability of local state universities to provide. Therefore, state universities that were initially not very selective are increasingly raising entry requirements, thereby raising the prestige of these universities, as well as sending increasing numbers of students abroad. Bahrain sponsors large numbers of PhD students to complete their studies abroad, with generous stipends and allowances for families, while sending students abroad to study is still virtually the basis of the Saudi international trade. In 2005, King Abdullah's Sponsorship Programme (KASP) was established through a Saudi-US agreement, and this has made Saudi Arabia the fourth largest sponsor of international students to the US, with over 100,000 Saudi students enrolling in American universities last year against a total of 200,000 worldwide (Taylor and Albasri, 2014).

The policy implies several things. First, a working model of the relationship between individual and collective, and local and global, capital that casts higher education more emphatically than in the UK as the *source* of collective human capital rather than a means of managing it. It also seems to imply a reading of global capital where degrees from American universities are more valuable than others, particularly those from Saudi Arabia whose rankings were reported to be falling in 2013 (Hall, 2013). The perceived prestige of American degrees saw Saudi government inclusion in 2012 of even relatively low-status American *community* colleges on the list of approved institutions for KASP (Taylor and Albasri, 2014). Yet the perceived superiority of Western educated workers over locally graduated students seems to be fading. For scholarship students, the cultural and academic differences between the two countries cause tensions, including student difficulty re-adapting to their country of origin, and Saudi graduates who have taken for granted that their Western degrees would earn them a good job are said to be disappointed (Taylor and Albasri, 2014; Albeity, 2014). Employers in Saudi Arabia are beginning to introduce employability tests, which have been failed by graduates from 'Western' universities, whether branch campus or overseas, more often than those from local ones (Taylor and Albasri, 2014). And it is noted that branch campuses addressing the standards issue by replicating their home curriculum have found it harder than they expected to both recruit and retain local students (Altbach, 2010; Statz et al, 2007). Thus the policy also reflects a form of competition on the part of both state and individuals that is reputational in global terms, but where this reputation is in many ways in conflict with local needs.

Employability as higher education capital is further undermined by the problematically tenuous and gendered link between higher education and employment. It has been fairly widely noted that many Saudi students don't consider it worth going into higher education as there is guaranteed public sector employment without (Statz et al, 2007; Gonzalez et al, 2008; Donn and Al-Mathri, 2010). Yet this does not apply equally to men and women. Saudi women students say that higher education is more critical to *their* career opportunities than men's. Greater female participation has been enabled by the residually high proportion of single-sex HEIs in Saudi Arabia (though branch campuses are mixed), the increase in more *local* HEIs and the development of distance-learning (Baki, 2004). At the same time, former restrictions, for instance on entering studies in engineering, industry, construction, journalism, pharmacy and architecture, have been lifted (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). Of the increased numbers of students being sent to study, more are now women (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). Notwithstanding evidence that female Gulf students are seeing higher education as a

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3 route to intellectual~social freedom (Findlow, 2012), Saudi state investment in women's
4 higher education is driven by training for work (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011:71),
5 and most of this, especially through KASP, is still allocated to health, social services and
6 education, despite the fund's declared *raison d'être* of enabling women to enter the
7 private sector market (Baki, 2004). Over in Bahrain, in 2012 the government has shifted
8 sponsorship away from the humanities and social sciences towards the sectors where
9 women are considered likely to make the greatest economic contribution – healthcare
10 and education – with increased industry and private financing (Secretariat General,
11 2012). However, although women form a substantial majority of the student population
12 here as well, persistently low female graduate employment has been consistently
13 attributed to social and economic conditions that make work more of a lifestyle choice
14 than an economic necessity (Secretariat General, 2012).

15 Like the UAE and Qatar, Bahrain is also committed to increasing investment in the
16 private and overseas financing of local higher education, including forging partnerships
17 with foreign universities. Eleven private~international universities were established
18 between 2001 and 2005, with another in 2012. In 2012, 14,287 students reportedly
19 enrolled in private universities compared with 18,040 in state universities, even though
20 one private university had only forty-four students (Higher Education Council, 2012).
21 the justification being the supposed high numbers of international students wishing to
22 study in Bahrain. Thus as well as sending students abroad, the government has sought
23 both to attract international students to study in Bahrain (Higher Education Council,
24 2014), even though foreign nationals have normally not been allowed entry to state
25 universities in the Gulf states. International students in Bahrain are now drawn from
26 other GCC countries, mostly Kuwait (32%) and Saudi Arabia (16%), and in 2012 the
27 number of students from 'other countries' was reported to be 35% (Higher Education
28 Council, 2012). The agenda is part of the country's 'economic vision 2030', to
29 "...position(ing) Bahrain as a regional hub for quality higher education, producing
30 graduates with the skills, knowledge and behaviours required to succeed in the global
31 knowledge economy while contributing to the sustainable and competitive growth of
32 Bahrain" (Higher Education Council, 2014:11). Yet as all but one of Bahrain's private
33 universities still award local qualifications, these private universities represent ways in
34 which even the internationalisation process has been very local.

35 The privatisation inherent to this process brings more 'glocalization' characteristics, as
36 well as tensions in terms of the ways that perceived global capital vies with local needs,
37 especially in Bahrain which has bought more wholeheartedly into transnational higher
38 educational capitalism as a trader not just a buyer. Here, part of the tension relates to
39 competing standards – striving for an 'international' qualification framework while
40 qualifying local graduates well for the local market. On one hand, the Bahraini Quality
41 Assurance Authority for Education and Training has closed down two private universities
42 and prevented others from recruiting new students. On the other hand, the desire to
43 raise the international prestige of its private institutions has seen it tighten admissions
44 criteria for local students, which have been based to-date on the local '*Tawjih*' system
45 (Higher Education Council, 2014). The tension also relates to socio-cultural fit. Belying
46 the apparently clear government vision in both countries of universities as mechanisms
47 for the production of economic capital, in either human or real-estate investment terms,
48 is the undercurrent of a rhetoric reminding local audiences of higher education's role in
49 'creating leaders' and promoting good cultural and family values (Findlow, 2008). In
50 Saudi Arabia this has taken the form of caution about isomorphic network pressures and
51 global model diffusion: "... through Islam, the Kingdom can prove to the world how it is
52 capable of developing and progressing better than other states and without imitating the
53 models of such states" (Prince Khaled, cited in Pavan, 2014).

54 This tension makes the curriculum, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels,
55 telling. In Bahrain, there has been a government push to align taught programmes more
56 closely with the needs of the local labour market. Humanities and business studies are
57 said to have been oversupplied, and "social science graduates lack employability skills"
58 (Secretariat General, 2012:3). As well as the funding shift, non-workforce focused
59 subjects have been culled (Higher Education Council, 2014). Yet the goal of Bahrain's
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3 recently developed national research strategy is more balanced: "... to help transform
4 the Bahraini economy into Knowledge Economy, to reduce Bahrain's dependence on
5 natural resources, ensure long-term social, environmental and cultural well-being of the
6 Kingdom, ... advance the prestige of the Kingdom within the region and globally and
7 provide local opportunities for Bahraini citizens for world-class education and research"
8 (Stanford Research Institute, 2014:25). However, research programmes are only
9 available at the country's most three established local universities and, so far, no
10 national research funding has been awarded to universities (Higher Education Council,
11 2012). Furthermore, while the research strategy notes the need to increase research
12 outputs to support the transition to a knowledge economy, it also urges greater
13 integration between academic institutions and business enterprises focused on
14 Bahrain's economic priorities (Stanford Research Institute, 2014). In Saudi Arabia,
15 consistent stress on the need to properly prepare graduates for future jobs (Baki, 2004)
16 is more balanced by rulers' invocation of higher education's role in the holistic, ideational
17 education of citizens: "... we have a formidable task ahead of us. We have been
18 entrusted with a huge responsibility of building good citizens ..." (Prince Khaled, cited in
19 Pavan, 2014). Nonetheless, this holistic vision is undermined by the narrowly
20 instrumental way the Saudi government chooses graduate students' fields of study: top
21 of the list are medicine, medical science and health sciences, fields seen as essential for
22 the country's development (Taylor and Albasri, 2014).

23 Conclusions

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25 These accounts thus provide two related but slightly distinct readings of present and
26 future higher education capital and capitalism, with regional *characteristics* while
27 reflecting more *local* interests in a global game. The same ingredients are present in
28 different measures: rampant free-market competitiveness, the promotion of private
29 investment in state-owned institutions, a variety of conceptions of global capital, high
30 value placed on foreign qualifications and extremely light-tough governance set in a
31 regional context of real policy~resource sharing, residual ideals of higher education as a
32 public good for the education of citizens but with local workforce needs high on the
33 agenda. But Bahrain has bought more wholesale into the competition – as both importer
34 and exporter, public good with private investment (like the rest of the world aspires to).
35 And this is despite the *rentier* history of the Gulf states.

36
37 There is strategic ambivalence in both countries, reflecting divergent readings of similar
38 markets and competing concepts of capital, reflected in financing, governance,
39 curriculum and standards. This can be seen best in Bahrain's drive to create regional
40 hubs, reducing the need for students to go abroad and also to generate economic return
41 in competition with Bahrain's neighbours. While in Saudi Arabia, American degrees are
42 eagerly imported, yet there is apparent caution about blind borrowing.

43
44 Despite the stronger history of regional sharing of both capital and policy in the Gulf, the
45 main driver is interstate competition, despite light-touch state governance. There is no
46 sign of 'global capital' in the sense of *shared* capital; 'global higher education' simply
47 denotes the trading environment. Compared with the early ABEGS days, regionalism
48 appears limited today. And since GCC regional governance is not, as Bologna aimed to
49 be, a 'standardising project', it may therefore fit more easily with a free-market approach
50 to higher educational business. State governance has clearly shifted some way from
51 guardianship of public good(s) in any sense other than economic good. The public roles
52 played by private foreign providers in each importing can be seen as both symptom and
53 cause of the fragmentation of regional and national systems of governance.

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55 So what does this multi-stakeholder ambivalence say about transnational higher
56 education capitalism and its relationship with governance and the public good? Well,
57 clearly it shows that the phenomenon is not the same everywhere, providing a case-in-
58 point of 'glocalization' as the opportunity to re-conceive structures, systems, priorities,
59 collectivities and paradigms, with not exactly blurred but infinitely moveable boundaries
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between public and private, between local, regional and international, and between markets and culture. Hence the need to hedge bets.

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