

# Global Inequality and Widening Global Access in Cross-Border and Transnational Higher Education

The Case of the Global Studies Programme 2002-2013  
(Freiburg, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Bangkok and Delhi)

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**Abstract:** Transnational study programs and international mobility in higher education are rising. Recently, new forms of widening access and improving participation are being discussed on the national level. All the actions taken are expected to impact positively on underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in higher education, particularly for prospective students from lower socio-economic strata, under-represented gender or ethnic groups, disabled people, mature students and care givers, etc. On the international level, this debate on participation and access seems to be less marked. However, an analysis of the social dimension of widening global access has to consider not only national and international class barriers but also the gender, age, language and regional background of students.

By analyzing the grades of 320 students enrolled in the Global Studies Programme between 2002 and 2013, a jointly operated transnational social science master's program located in Argentina, Germany, India, South Africa, and Thailand, this article provides empirical evidence that global inequality might be reproduced within such a transnational educational setting as well. In summary, we do not find significant correlations between gender and grading, age and grading or language and grading. However, a strong and significant correlation between provenance and grades can be found. Our findings can be interpreted as additional findings for the existence of a Northern-dominated higher education system, even amid cooperation with the Global South.

## Introduction

In recent years, international student mobility has increased significantly by approximately 250 percent (ICEF 2015).<sup>3</sup> The OECD (2016) estimates that there were roughly 1.3 million international students enrolled in master's and doctoral programs in OECD countries in 2014, representing about 26 percent of all internationally mobile students throughout the OECD that year. Overall, international students account for about 12 percent of all master's-level enrolments in OECD countries, and 27 percent of enrolments at the doctoral level.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic is massively restricting mobility, and could lead to a cultural shift toward virtual mobility, it is nevertheless expected that by 2025 eight million students will be studying abroad (Altbach 2004). In this context, the trend has been toward internationalizing the curriculum of higher education since the beginning of the 1990s (Harari 1992; van der Wende 1996; Rizvi and Walsh 1998). Consequently, internationalization is a major challenge for universities, either by attracting and diversifying the source of students, opening international branch

campuses or introducing courses with one or two years spent abroad (Wildavsky 2010).

Without question, international higher education has also become a highly valuable asset, signaling to potential employers the ability to cope with the contemporary globalized world (Hayward 2000; Wit 2000; Davis 2003; Gürüz 2008) and an education in “global citizenship” (Dower 2003; Shultz 2007). International higher education also helps to develop (inter-)cultural competencies (Behrnd and Porzelt 2012; McInnes et al. 2017). It is seen as a “cross-cultural value” (Bossman 1991), “cross-cultural competence” (Greenholtz 2000) or “transnational cultural capital” (Sklair 2002; Lenger et al. 2010); and the issue of education export and transfer of intellectual capital in transnational higher education comes to the forefront (Knight 2013; Kosmützky and Putty 2016; Lönnqvist et al. 2018). Consequently, there exists a growing body of work on the motivations of students to study at offshore campuses (e.g. Li and Bray 2007; Pyvis and Chapman 2007; Wilkins et al. 2012).

Amid the transnationalization and globalization of higher education, the social dimension of access restrictions has to be recognized. On the national level, tertiary education is widely considered a field where social inequality is (re)produced (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit 2007; Wakeling and Boliver 2017). Similarly, the field of transnational higher education faces the same problem of becoming an “instrument of social segregation” (Vasagar 2011), i.e. excluding certain groups from access to this valuable asset. In addition to the positive effects of global learning and increasing exchange opportunities, negative effects like social exclusion and the reproduction of global inequality must be taken into account (Wit 2000). Following these arguments, scholars agree that internationalization has to be seen as a challenge:

Internationalization needs careful strategic monitoring because it is vulnerable. National policies continue to prevail, uncomfortable international experiences tend to reinforce nationalism and chauvinism. The political and economic context of internationalization in higher education can easily open the door for support of neo-colonialism and increase in the north-south disparities. (Teichler 1999, 21)

Recently, new forms of widening access and improving participation are being discussed on the national level (e.g. Tonks and Farr 2003; HEFCE 2006; Oduaran and Bhola 2006). In a nutshell, widening initiatives meant to expand access are expected to impact positively on underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in higher education, particularly on prospective students from lower socio-economic strata, underrepresented gender or ethnic groups, disabled people, mature students and care givers, etc. (Meeuwisse et al. 2010).

On the international level, this debate on widening global access seems to be less marked. For example, the term inequality does not form a keyword cluster nor are the countries of the Global South of special interest in contemporary publications on transnational higher education (cf. Kosmützky and Putty 2016). Since competencies are reproduced unequally in comparison to social status, the need is for widening participation of students from lower classes and – on the transnational level – from developing countries. Likewise, widening global access must be understood as increasing opportunities for people from developing countries in the Global South to participate in transnational higher education (Lenger et al. 2011). Thus, widening global access implies that the comparison between students from the Global North and from the Global South cannot be made on an absolute level but rather a relative approach must be applied, given the unequal global starting positions and diverse educational backgrounds when considering issues of transnational higher education (Lenger et al. 2011).

The question we want to answer here is how unequal capabilities and possibilities are reproduced within transnational higher education. To do so, we have conducted a case study on the Global Studies Programme, an international two-year social science master's programme run by University of Freiburg and being equally located in Argentina, Germany, India, South Africa and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> Students start their studies in the first semester in Freiburg, then can choose between Cape Town and Buenos Aires in the second semester before transferring to New Delhi or Bangkok in the third semester. In their final semester, all students return to Freiburg to write their thesis and finish their degree. This paper contributes to discussion of participation in transnational higher education on the micro-level by analyzing an international master's programme as a case study of widening global access.

There is currently almost no empirical data available on international study programs and the reproduction of social inequalities, since most international majors have only recently been founded and student data is usually not published due to privacy issues. Of course, some studies focus on comparisons between different countries and trends in internationalization (EU 2015), others show patterns of internationalization within a certain country (Carlson and McChesney 2016) or give insight in the reproduction of social inequalities through (in)accessibility to higher education (Gegel et al. 2015).

Micro-level insights from case studies, however, are still scarce. For example, McInnes et al. (2017) analyze the expectations and experiences of two academic staff and two students who took part in an international social work programme. Culross and Tarver (2011) analyze an International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in the US. Viggiano et al. (2018) investigate the ways in which community college decision makers justify the inclusion of international students at three community colleges in the US. Identifying the recruitment strategies and motivations of international students, they conclude that community college decision makers first crafted a class of privileged international students and then justified price discrimination on the basis of said privilege. Viggiano et al. (2018) find that such a system of international access prevents decision makers from recognizing the needs of low socioeconomic status international students and international students from disadvantaged countries. Altogether, we conclude that there is still little research on exclusion from international courses focusing on the social interactions influencing the development of transnational higher education (Bordogna 2018).

Insights from the Global Studies Programme, running since 2002, can help to illustrate issues of widening global access and the reproduction of regional inequality in transnational higher education in more detail. In fact, we provide empirical evidence that the regional background of students significantly affects success in studying within a transnational environment. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 summarizes the theoretical concept of widening global access. Sections 3 and 4 present the case of the Global Studies Programme. Section 5 presents empirical findings on the outcomes and results of the Global Studies Programme analyzing the grades of 320 graduated students from 2002 to 2013. Section 6 concludes the paper and discusses the relevant theoretical and empirical findings.

## Widening Global Access

Widening access and improving participation is meant to address social inequalities in accessing higher education. More specifically, the aim is to increase opportunities for people from a diverse range of backgrounds in order for them to benefit from higher education. Theoretically, widening

access deals with the concept of social classes in association with socio-economic disadvantages. Historically, the “Access Movement” tried to open entry opportunities emphasizing the aspirations of under-represented groups (Lenger et al. 2011). However, particular social groups, defined e.g. by social class, gender or ethnic background, are systematically under-represented in national as well as in international higher education (e.g. Jacobs 1996; Lynch and O’Riordan 1998). Three types of barriers can be identified which result in an ongoing structure of inequality concerning access to institutions and programmes of higher education (Gorard 2006): (1) *Situational barriers* identify individuals’ direct costs for education (tuition fees, learning materials, living expenses) as well as indirect costs like the loss or lack of time or the physical distance to a learning institution. (2) *Institutional barriers* represent formal admission procedures. This kind of barriers can be summarized as a general lack of institutional flexibility that limits the formal availability of opportunities (admission procedures like deadlines, formal recognition of degrees, application fees, visa policies, and restrictions due to citizenship). The third kind of barriers are *dispositional barriers* (3) by which the individual’s motivations are taken into account, such as attitudes to learning conditioned by familiar, social and/or cultural backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

Summing up, the theoretical concept of widening global access can be understood as the political reaction to inequality in transnational higher education. Such an approach acknowledges that, in reality, highly talented people from less developed countries might be discriminated against by ascriptive factors, which thus demands an inclusive counter-strategy (Lenger et al. 2011).

Generally, it is widely acknowledged that the processes of globalization reinforce dynamics of social inequality (Boatcă 2015; Lenger and Schumacher 2015). It “tends to concentrate wealth, knowledge, and power in those already possessing these elements” (Altbach and Knight 2007, 291). Hence it can be argued that the tendency of a division of the world’s population into a globalized rich and a localized poor (Bauman 1998; Beck 2000) is not only maintained but also extended through the transnationalization and globalization of education systems. As Altbach and Knight accurately describe:

International academic mobility similarly favors well-developed education systems and institutions, thereby compounding existing inequalities. Initiatives and programs, coming largely from the north, are focused on the south. Northern institutions and corporations own most knowledge, knowledge products, and IT infrastructure, though south-to-south activities are increasing, especially in Asia and Africa. (Altbach and Knight 2007, 291)

Moreover, even though students move largely from the Global South to developed countries in the Global North, still the North largely controls this process to its own benefit. Without going into detail (for a detailed discussion see Lenger et al. 2011), it can be argued in line with Pierre Bourdieu (1981, 1984), Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989) and Amartya Sen (1999, 2010) that there exist different capabilities and competence levels resulting from different social structural positions and familial backgrounds of individuals. Concisely, we observe inequality within nations and between nations (Boatcă 2015; Lenger and Schumacher 2015). Not only do national class backgrounds have to be considered for an analysis of unequal access opportunities to higher education, but also the regional background of students is of utmost importance. Consequently, a paradigm shift from a human capital orientation towards a human development perspective in the field of international higher education is needed. From such a perspective widening access in higher education is about not only increasing “excellence” by including highly talented individuals, but also about “responsibility” by providing education and increasing the capabilities of

people. In consideration of the growing importance of cross-border study programs due to continuing internationalization of higher education (Qiang 2003; Altbach and Knight 2007), the three types of barriers mentioned above become more salient. However, especially in the growing sector of transnational education and global studies programmes (cf. the emergence of global studies programmes at European universities in Berlin, Bern, Freiburg, Ghent, Gothenburg, Graz, Kassel, Leipzig, London, Roskilde, Vienna, and Wrocław)<sup>6</sup> only limited theoretical analysis exists so far (e.g. Lenger et al. 2011).

## The Global Studies Programme

The Global Studies Programme, founded in 2002, is an international two-year social science master's program conducted jointly by FLACSO Buenos Aires (Argentina), University of Freiburg (Germany), Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi (India), Cape Town University (South Africa), and Chulalongkorn Bangkok (Thailand). In this programme, students start their studies in the first semester in Freiburg, can then choose between Cape Town and Buenos Aires in the second semester before transferring to New Delhi or Bangkok in the third semester. In their final semester all students return to Freiburg to write their thesis and finish their degree.<sup>7</sup>

The programme's interdisciplinary curriculum includes sociology, political sciences, ethnology and cultural geography. The concept is to study social sciences in various (academic) cultures and regions focusing on globalization processes in the Global South. Representing one of the first master's programs of its kind worldwide, the aim of the Global Studies Programme is to provide students with knowledge, methods and practical skills for comparative analysis of the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of globalization processes in a research-led institutional framework. A core element of the curriculum is studying at three places on three different continents in a flexible and student-centered learning environment to make students become aware of the relativity and social construction of societies, politics and cultures. People with a degree from the Global Studies Programme are qualified for a wide range of jobs in academic settings, international and non-governmental organizations, in government, private companies and businesses which require analytical capabilities, teamwork and leadership skills (for a summary of the multiple perspective and transnational curriculum of the Global Studies Programme see Table 1 below).

Well-appointed with twelve years' of experience and empirical data, the program can illustrate the process of widening global access in more detail. Between 2002 and 2013, 320 international students have graduated from the Global Studies Programme, with 31.1 percent of students being male and 68.9 percent female. This student body originates from 62 countries (for an overview see appendix). Figure 1 shows the origin of students grouped by continent. The data show that half of the students come from Europe, reflecting what Davis (2003, 3) calls "the global center for international student mobility". It is worth noting that the distribution among students by country is unequal. For example, just five countries account for nearly 50 percent of the students – Germany (28 percent), USA (10 percent), South Africa (4.2 percent), Italy (3.5 percent) and India (3.5 percent) – while 16 countries are represented by two students, and 22 countries by just one student.<sup>8</sup> Apart from the fact that admission practices also roughly reflect the proportions of applications from different parts of the world, it must also be mentioned that often students originating from the Global South who have already been admitted to the programme have to cancel at short notice due to financial difficulties or complicated visa procedures. However, in the continuity of 12 batches, the Global Studies Programme represents all regions of the globe.

Module	Globalization	Global Governance	Cultural Change	Methodology
I. Freiburg	Theories of Globalization (7 ECTS)	International Politics (7 ECTS)	European Social Thought (7 ECTS)	Anthropology and Geography (7 ECTS) Data Management (1 ECTS)
II. Buenos Aires or	Global Public Sphere (7 ECTS)	Global Economy and Society (7 ECTS)	Culture and Identity in Latin America (7 ECTS)	Empirical Research Project (7 ECTS)
II. Cape Town	Deviance, Culture, Social Action (7 ECTS)	Development Theory and Practice (7 ECTS)	Cape Town Politics and Society (7 ECTS)	Problem-driven Social and Economic Research (7 ECTS)
III. New Delhi or	Sociological Knowledge (7 ECTS)	Globalization, International Institutions and Society (7 ECTS)	South Asian Social Thought and Media (7 ECTS)	Techniques of Social Research (7 ECTS)
III. Bangkok	Globalization and Development in Southeast Asia (7 ECTS)	Global Governance (7 ECTS)	Southeast Asian Peoples and Cultures (7 ECTS)	Research Methods in Southeast Asian Studies (7 ECTS)
IV. Internship	Internship in an international institution, duration: at least 8 weeks (5 ECTS)			
V. Freiburg	Master Thesis (25 ECTS) Master-Colloquium (2 ECTS) Global Studies Forum/presentation & discussion of internships (1 ECTS) Oral exam (2 ECTS)			

Table 1: *Curriculum Global Studies Programme*

Comparing student mobility in general with the degree of internationalization of the Global Studies Programme, we have to acknowledge that student mobility is hard to measure (Hayward 2000; Davis 2003; Gürüz 2008). Nevertheless, some data are available showing a modest increase of student mobility over recent years. The numbers for the US are still very low; with only 0.8 percent of students going abroad yearly, and only about 3 percent of US students in their undergraduate degrees (Hayward 2000). In Europe, student mobility is evident in about 2 percent of the total student population, varying from lows of less than 1 percent in Finland and the Mediterranean countries, to 3.6 percent in Belgium, 4 percent in the United Kingdom, 5.6 percent in Austria, and 6 percent in Germany.

For an international comparison, the *Atlas of Student Mobility* (Davis 2003) and *Higher Education and International Student Mobility in the Global Knowledge Economy* (Gürüz 2008) were used. Compared with higher education in Germany, the Global Studies Programme is quite international. While only approximately 13 percent of students at German universities are international students, approximately 75 percent in the Global Studies Programme are international

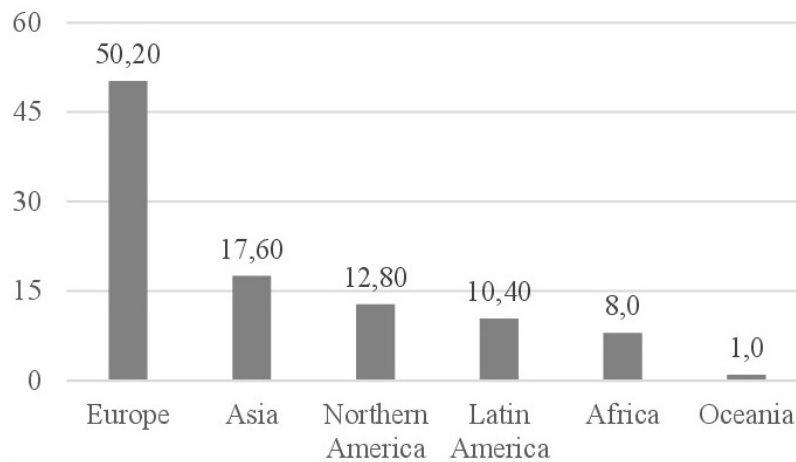


Figure 1: *Origin of Students (in %)*<sup>9</sup>

students. While European enrollments account for almost 65 percent of Germany's international students (with 23 percent of them coming from within the EU), in the Global Studies Programme, "only" 50 percent are European enrollments – including German students. Moreover, while on average one-third of internationals in Germany come from high-income countries, within the Global Studies Programme it is about 25 percent.

## Access to the Global Studies Programme

The Global Studies Programme has an acceptance rate of approximately 15-20 percent; on average between 150 and 200 bachelor's students apply, while only 30 are accepted per year. Figure 2 shows the frequency of applications between 2007 and 2013. Unfortunately, since no data were available for the time period between 2002 and 2006 these figures refer to different time spans and different numbers of applicants and therefore cannot count as a perfect comparison. Nevertheless, the data indicate a general trend worth recognizing here.

European admissions (50.2 percent) exceed the frequency of European applicants (40.6 percent). Consequently, the over-representation of European (and especially German) students must be recognized and adjusted accordingly. Irrespectively of the relations (meaning the regional background of an applicant) the crucial point must be the quality of the applications. To determine which applicants are academically qualified for admission to the Global Studies Programme, distinct factors have to be considered in an annual evaluation and selection process. The application process of the Global Studies Programme consists of several parts. Besides a central application form, two standardized recommendation letters, a language certificate (TOEFL, IELTS, or CAE), a bachelor's degree in a social sciences discipline<sup>10</sup> and an essay or motivation statement about the academic and/or professional intentions of the candidate are the required components of an application that can be considered for selection to the Programme. Due to the over-representation of European and North American applicants, minimum quotas for students from the regions of the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) have been introduced. The goal of the selection process is to achieve a balance between global representation and high academic qualifications.

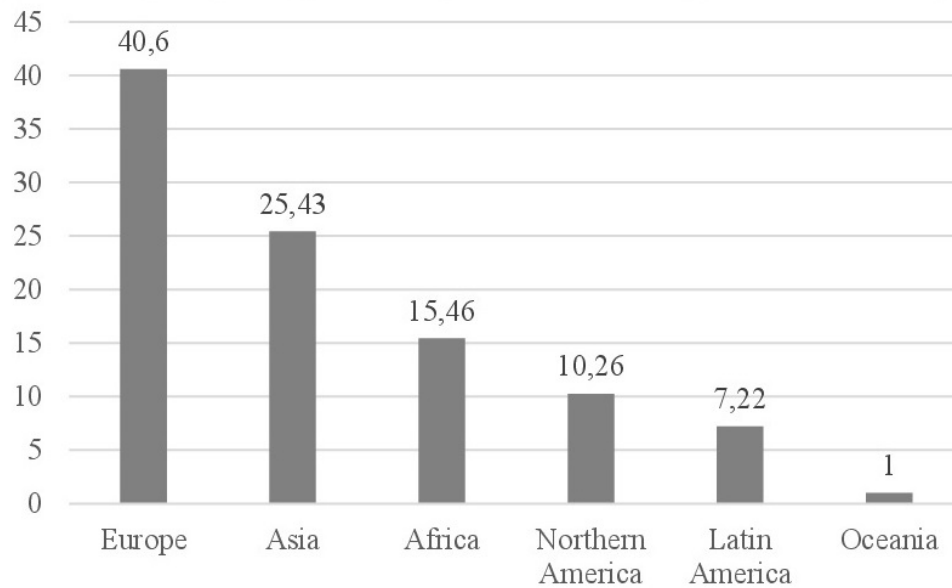


Figure 2: *Frequency of Applications (Global Studies Programme 2007-2013) (in %)*

## Academic Performance in Transnational Higher Education

We use internal data from the Global Studies Programme to measure academic development against the regional background of international students. In total, we have collected comprehensive data from 320 international students graduated from the programme, including grades and regional characteristics. Since we have access to grades from twelve years' of international higher education, we were in the position to analyze country/continental differences in educational outcome inductively, i.e. we are able to relate academic performance to the regional backgrounds of students.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, we were able to correlate the students' performance with the corresponding location of study (India, Thailand, Germany, and South Africa). Table 2 below shows the performance results.

	GPA
Final Grade	1.62
Master Thesis	1.72
Oral Exam	1.62
Module 1: Globalization	1.68
Module 2: Global Governance	1.78
Module 3: Cultural Change	1.63
Module 4: Methodology	1.66

Table 2: *Performance Results*<sup>12</sup>

Here, three findings are of interest: First, students score on average 1.62 in their final grades, meaning they graduate with a B+ average, which is in line with grade inflation in social sciences all around the world (Johnson 2003; Rojstaczer and Healy 2010).<sup>13</sup> Second, the written results of the master's theses are lower than the oral examination. Even though the analysis contains



only grades, this finding could be seen – in line with Bourdieu and Passeron (1977/ 1979) – as a minor habitus effect on grading since social background influences oral grade performance more than written exams. Third, there is a minor grade difference in the modules exposing a grading difference among the participating disciplines.

To analyze the issue of widening global access, a correlation analysis has been run to test the relationship between student characteristics and grading in the Global Studies Programme. In summary, we do not find significant correlations between gender and grading, age and grading or between language and grading. However, a strong and statistically significant correlation between regional provenance and grades can be observed.

### Widening Global Access and Gender

The data reveal interesting findings. First, there is no significant gender bias. Even though male students perform slightly better in the oral examination and some other modules than women, no significant correlation between the modules or the locations can be observed. Consequently, the statistical analysis seems to suggest that there is no gender discrimination within the Global Studies Programme. Table 3 summarizes the grading results by gender:

	Male	Female
Final Examination	1.60	1.63
Thesis	1.70	1.72
Oral	1.57	1.64
Module 1: Globalization	1.65	1.69
Module 2: Global Governance	1.74	1.80
Module 3: Cultural Change	1.60	1.64
Module 4: Methodology	1.68	1.66
Location 1: Germany	1.77	1.83
Location 2: South Africa	1.58	1.62
Location 3: India	1.73	1.72
Location 4: Argentina	1.89	1.87
Location 5: Thailand	1.29	1.32

*Table 3: Grading Results by Gender*

### Widening Global Access and Age

The performance of a student is not significantly influenced by his or her age. Students being 24 years old or younger perform nearly the same as students being older than 24 years. Table 4 shows the grades in relation to the age of the students:

Age	Average	N	Standard Deviation
<24	1.60	107	0.28
>24	1.62	182	0.26
<b>Total</b>	1.61	320	0.27

*Table 4: Grading Results by Age*

## Widening Global Access and Language

To ensure that no language effect takes place, countries of origin have been grouped in line with Kachrus's three circles of English. Kachru (1992) distinguishes between three groups of English users:

- Inner Circle: English as a native language, i.e. the primary language of the majority population speaks English, as in countries like the US, UK or Australia.
- Expanding circle: English is a foreign language; used almost exclusively for international communication such as in Japan, Argentina or Germany.
- Outer Circle: English is a second language, i.e. an additional language for intranational usage in multilingual nations; like India, Nigeria, and Singapore. In fact, it can be assumed that students aiming for the Global Studies Programme will be frequent English speakers.
- Little English: we have added a fourth category named "Little English". Here we have grouped countries which traditionally have very low English proficiency; like Russia, China, etc.

Table 5 displays the results of the different language circles. The data reveal that students from the inner circle and the expanding circle finish the Global Studies Programme slightly better than the outer circle, though there are only minor differences. Moreover, the outer circle performs less successfully than the inner and expanding circles in all locations. However, it must be noticed that countries which were grouped in the inner circle and expanding circle represent the Global North, whereas the outer circle consists mostly of countries which are usually associated with the Global South. To test for a language effect induced by English proficiency an additional correlation between language and grades has been conducted. Although differences in language competences and in the oral performance of the students seem to be obvious (especially in the first semester in Freiburg), no language effect could be found on the level of the grades.

	Inner Circle	Expanding Circle	Outer Circle	Little English
Final Grade	1.60	1.55	1.74	1.74
Master Thesis	1.70	1.64	1.85	1.86
Oral Exam	1.58	1.56	1.8	1.68
Germany	1.82	1.72	2.02	1.9
South Africa	1.64	1.55	1.7	1.67
India	1.72	1.70	1.78	1.8
Argentina	1.65	1.82	2.03	2.13
Thailand	1.16	1.30	1.59	1.35

*Table 5: Grading Performance by Groups of Language Users*

## Widening Global Access and Regional Backgrounds

Finally, what we find is a significant correlation between grades obtained by students and the regions they come from (see Table 6).

Continents of Origin	Mean Value	N	Standard Deviation
Northern America	1.54	37	0.224
Europe	1.55	145	0.240
Oceania	1.67	3	0.058
Latin America	1.71	30	0.293
Asia	1.76	51	0.295
Total	1.62	320	0.273

Table 6: *Regional Grading Performance*

First, we have checked for any disciplinary effects, e.g. that Europeans perform better in sociology than students from Latin America. In short, we find no significant correlation between a particular module and the regional background of the student, so a specific discipline effect can be excluded. Second, we have controlled for a regional effect within transnational higher education. Interestingly, we find a correlation between all grading components, i.e. the master's thesis, the oral examination and the courses. Moreover, we find students' total performances are exactly in line with what we would expect when considering the relative position of a continent in the international higher education world system (see Table 7).

	Freiburg	South Africa	Argentina	India	Thailand
Northern America	1.73	1.58	1.66	1.67	1.21
Europe	1.71	1.55	1.78	1.69	1.30
Oceania	1.99	1.60	2.00	1.62	–
Latin America	1.99	1.62	1.94	1.76	1.38
Africa	2.05	1.74	1.89	1.77	1.17
Asia	1.93	1.71	2.20	1.82	1.40
Total	1.90	1.63	1.91	1.72	1.32

Table 7: *Grading Performance by Provenance*

Northern America and Europe rank first and second with grade averages of 1.54 and 1.55, respectively; in third place comes Oceania achieving an average of 1.67; in fourth rank is Latin America with an average of 1.71; in fifth place, Asia with an average of 1.76; and Africa ranks last with an average of 1.77. Consequently, we observe a significant dividing line between the Northern and the Southern countries across all locations and modules.

These results demonstrate that at all locations of the Global Studies Programme, students from the Global North outperform students from Southern academic cultures. The findings suggest two possible explanations. First, assuming that capabilities are shared equally among students the data could suggest that students from the Global South are being discriminated against. However, since the same correlations can be found for the modules, this does not seem very plausible. Therefore, a second explanation would be that students from the Global South are “relatively less qualified” to study within the setting of the Global Studies Programme. A possible explanation for the lower performance of students from the Global South is that the Global Studies Programme operates at all locations – in the Global North, but also in the Global South – in accordance with the rules of Northern academic culture. It seems that students originating from Southern academic systems are less trained to succeed in such a system, and consequently grade lower than members from Northern higher-education systems. The findings, of course, are quite alarming

since it means that within all locations the Northern dominated academic culture prevails, leading to a competitive disadvantage for students from the Global South.

## Conclusion

Widening global access to transnational higher education is about increasing opportunities for people from lower strata in under-represented countries and regions of the Global South. More precisely, since capabilities are reproduced unequally in comparison to social status, the need is for widening participation of students from lower classes from the Global South and North (Lenger et al. 2011).<sup>14</sup>

It is important to understand the structures of transnational higher education that shape whether students have success in transnational study programs, and how these structures are linked to broader issues of regional inequality and social stratification. This paper has conducted a case study of an international two-year master's program investigating the idea of widening global access on the micro-level, i.e. closing the participation gap of students from underrepresented countries in transnational higher education. It provides new evidence on the issue of Northern dominance in transnational higher education and of the related reproduction of inequality on the international level. Of course, our conclusions cannot be generalized simply since they are only based on one specific programme. Furthermore, there are some limitations of our study which must be taken into account. First, more data should be collected and analyzed; for example, class background. Second, we have to admit that grades do not necessarily objectively represent student capabilities but are rather an implicit and maybe biased tool to measure performance. The variety of locations, teachers and subjects make it difficult to compare the grades directly. Third, there might be problems when grouping people into provenance without knowing their position within their own social structure. Participants from the Global South might be elites, while participants from the Global North could have working class backgrounds. Unfortunately, such social structural effects cannot be controlled with our data. Finally, the authors have been personally involved in the program, which might bias the results as well.

Nevertheless, our data show that reducing institutional barriers do not eliminate existing inequalities in higher education resulting from the bachelor level. In the quantitative analysis, we analyzed different categories – gender, age, language and regional background – in relation to the grade performance of 320 students graduating from the program between 2002 and 2013. The Global Studies Programme appears as a best-practice example in terms of not reproducing structural inequalities if the dimensions of gender inequality, age inequality and language inequality are considered. But even within the egalitarian setting of the Global Studies Programme, a significant regional provenance effect exists, meaning that students with backgrounds from North American or European universities perform significantly better than students with other academic backgrounds.

To sum up, we found that by opening access, no “catch-up” process in grading by students from less developed countries takes place. Rather there exists a significant structural inequality in academic performance. The final grade differences between the world regions might look small, but is huge in comparison to the average final grades of B+. Hence, the assumption of globalization research that the globalization process leads to an intensification of social differences between the world regions (Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989; Wallerstein and Hopkins 1982; Bauman 1998) is

also present in the global academic field.

Reviewing our findings, we propose a two-step solution for policy recommendations in transnational higher education. In the first step, access must be granted to students from less represented regions. Widening global access must aim at reducing existing barriers to participation by implementing quotas and social scholarships for female students and/or students from under-represented world regions. However, other relevant socio-structural factors within the society of origin, such as class, ethnicity or gender, must also be taken into account. In this context, it is important to pay attention to specific differentiations within national societies. In this context, the tendency for more intensive “pre-structuring of students” – i.e. support for groups rather than for individual students in international exchange (Berchem 1991) – must be mentioned critically. We have demonstrated in our paper that these possibilities of widening global access are quite limited because structural inequalities cannot be compensated at the level of higher education alone. The underlying problem that the Global North dominates the academic strata must be taken into account to answer the question of how tertiary education should be organized in practice. Consequently, in a second step, additional courses (e.g. academic writing and statistical methods) and mentoring programs (e.g. academic self-organization, language classes) for students from lower social strata (especially if they furthermore originate from countries of the Global South) or with educationally alienated biographies are needed to guarantee equal starting positions in international higher education and to get familiar with the dominant Northern way of teaching. In theory, having a bachelor’s degree in social sciences should provide every student with the same capabilities. However, in practice this is not the case. Different regional backgrounds might result in different academic capabilities and consequently different academic starting positions.<sup>15</sup> The grading difference among all localtions, all semesters and every module indicates that a general academic disadvantage exists from the beginning of the program until graduation. Consequently, widening global access implies that comparison between students from Northern and Southern countries cannot be done on an absolute level, but rather a relative approach must be applied instead. Therefore, if academic programs assume a joint responsibility of equal opportunities for students from all regions of the world, it must be acknowledged among the faculty of the programs that students are equipped with different capabilities.

As set out above, widening global access – understood as a conceptual tool within the transnationalization process of higher education – does not aim only at *reducing existing barriers* to participation (i.e. reducing financial constraints in particular) but rather illustrates the necessity of *empowering students* with the necessary educational competencies to participate in transnational higher education (i.e. language skills, writing competencies, organizational competencies, and basic readings).

Along with implementing such a two-step solution, we argue in favor of a shift from “excellence” to “responsibility” in order to confront the global dimensions of inequality (for a broader discussion see Lenger et al. 2011). Since capabilities are reproduced unequally and access to higher education is blocked for a large number of highly talented people from the Global South, these students are systematically excluded from the globalization process of higher education, as they do not get the possibility to continue with their higher education on an international level. However, even if students from the Global South gain access to international higher education, we must recognize the persistent hidden global inequalities at work in academia, i.e. a dominance of Northern education styles. Taking these differences seriously implies *treating applicants and students differently*. Consequently, to realize the claim of equal participation the application processes of transnational study programs must be transformed into relational decisions and

evaluation procedures integrating relative regional quotas favoring applicants from less privileged areas and introducing relational grading in comparison to the improvements made.

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## Notes

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<sup>3</sup>Exact numbers are still unclear. Davis (2003) measures approximately 660,000 international students for the 26 most important countries. Altbach and Knight (2007, 303) measure two million international students. According to UNESCO (2012) at least 3.6 million students are expected to study abroad. For a recent and comprehensive survey on international student mobility see Gürüz (2008, 161-235).

<sup>4</sup>The authors of this study were program directors of the Global Studies Programme in Freiburg from October 2009 until December 2014. In the context of this activity, the data were initially collected for a conference on the 10th anniversary of the program and now are published in retrospect.

<sup>5</sup>For an overview on the problems of student mobility related to credit-transfer, missing recognition of foreign degrees, and quality assurance see e.g. van Damme (2001).

<sup>6</sup>Berlin: <http://global-studies-programme.com/>; Bern: <https://www.cgs.unibe.ch/>; Freiburg: [www.global-studies.de/](http://www.global-studies.de/); Ghent: <https://www.ugent.be/ps/en/education/programme.types/emgs>; Gothenburg: <https://www.gu.se/en/globalstudies>; Graz: <https://globalstudies.uni-graz.at/en/masters-programme/>; Kassel: <http://www.global-labour-university.org/>; Leipzig: <http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~gesi/index.php?id=57>; London: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/Graduate/degree-programmes-2021/MA-Global-Studies-A-European-Perspective>; Roskilde: <https://ruc.dk/en/global-studies-roskilde-university>; Vienna: <https://studieren.univie.ac.at/en/degree-programmes/master-programmes/global-history-and-global-studies-master/>; Wroclaw: <http://www.gs.uni.wroc.pl>

<sup>7</sup>In 2002, the Global Studies Programme started with three partners (in Freiburg, Durban, New Delhi) offering a joint degree between Freiburg and Durban. Due to administrative regulations in Germany, Freiburg hosts two semesters. In 2008, Buenos Aires joined the programme offering a second joint degree with Freiburg. In 2009, Bangkok joined the programme and an option for the third semester was created. In 2010, the programme moved from Durban to Cape Town. Due to administrative difficulties in Freiburg at that time, a Double Degree from Freiburg and Cape Town was initiated. Unfortunately, a detailed description on the history and internal structure of the Global Studies Programme would take us far afield. For further information see [www.global-studies.de](http://www.global-studies.de), Erasmus and Rehbein (2009) and Lenger et al. (2011, 365-367).

<sup>8</sup>This is in line with the general picture of student mobility: "From a global perspective, international educational mobility is the creation of the wealthier and better-developed countries with students moving between relatively similar places in terms of their economic and human development, with the notable exceptions of China and India and a few other emerging nations that also send large numbers of students to the developed world." (Davis 2003, 56). In the year 2000, the leading ten places of origin accounted for approximately 40 percent of all internationally mobile students. For an overview on the top 25 host countries see Gürüz (2008, 163).

<sup>9</sup>To avoid any Eurocentric bias, we did the continental grouping in line with the United Nations Statistic Division regions classification (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49regin.htm>). Of course, the chosen category of continents is rather broad and problematic due to existing differences and heterogeneity among countries. However, a more detailed differentiation into smaller regional categories goes beyond the scope of this paper and will be evaluated in a subsequent study.

<sup>10</sup>Under special circumstances the requirement of a bachelor's degree related to the social sciences can be replaced if the applicant shows equal academic competencies.

<sup>11</sup>Of course we are aware of the fact that grades in higher education do not perfectly reflect the competencies and performances of students. However, since all students within the Global Studies Programme have to meet the same requirements, grades might work as an implicit method to compare the performance of students across countries even though there might be a subjective bias among occasional grading results.

<sup>12</sup>The final grades are calculated as follows: the average of the module grades are weighted double but only the first decimal place is considered for each module. The grade of the final examination (weighted average of master thesis and oral exam) is weighted singly but only the first decimal place is considered for the final examination grade. After calculation again only the first decimal place is considered. Due to this threefold clipping of decimal grades, it is possible that final grades in average are significantly higher than the grades separately.

<sup>13</sup>Please note that the final grade consists of course-related examinations and a final examination (oral and master thesis). The course-related examinations are represented by the module grades. The final examination consists of a master thesis (25 ECTS) and an oral exam (2 ECTS).

<sup>14</sup>At this point we have to be very careful. Widening global access does not mean to equate lower classes (nationally) with developing countries (internationally). Developing countries are also highly stratified and participation in transnational educational programs is likely to be mostly open to students from families who have either money or higher education, or both. Nevertheless, we face the problem that access for students from lower social strata from developing countries is less likely than participation of students from lower social strata from developed countries.

<sup>15</sup>As a fact, we do assume that international higher education is highly dominated by the Northern education system and that most students from the Global South are less familiar with this system and the mode it operates. However, we do not approve this hegemonic situation normatively and would be happy if this situation can be overcome. Within the existing system we have to deal with Eurocentric domination of higher education and therefore we have to find ways to widen global access and allow for global success within international higher education.

## Appendix

	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
Germany	56	26.2	Armenia	1	.5
USA	23	10.7	Bangladesh	1	.5
South Africa	12	5.6	Belgium	1	.5
India	9	4.2	Bosnia & Herzegovina	1	.5
Canada	7	3.3	Cyprus	1	.5
Mexico	6	2.8	Czech Rep.	1	.5
Brazil	5	2.3	Denmark	1	.5
Romania	5	2.3	Guatemala	1	.5
Turkey	5	2.3	Indonesia	1	.5
China	4	1.9	Iran	1	.5
Italy	4	1.9	Ireland	1	.5
Russia	4	1.9	Lebanon	1	.5
UK	4	1.9	Malaysia	1	.5
Bulgaria	3	1.4	Moldova	1	.5
Colombia	3	1.4	Montenegro	1	.5
Ecuador	3	1.4	New Zealand	1	.5
Greece	3	1.4	Nigeria	1	.5
Argentina	2	.9	Pakistan	1	.5
Australia	2	.9	Peru	1	.5
Botswana	2	.9	Philippines	1	.5
Egypt	2	.9	Saint Lucia	1	.5
Finland	2	.9	Serbia	1	.5
Ghana	2	.9	Spain	1	.5
Japan	2	.9	Spanish	1	.5
Kenya	2	.9	Sweden	1	.5
Korea	2	.9	Ukraine	1	.5
Latvia	2	.9			
Netherlands	2	.9			
Norway	2	.9			
Poland	2	.9			
Singapore	2	.9			
Taiwan	2	.9			
Thailand	2	.9			
			<b>Total</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>100</b>

*Table: Countries of Origin*

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