Doing MOOCs in Dili: Southern agency and open online learning in Timor-Leste

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THESIS DECLARATION

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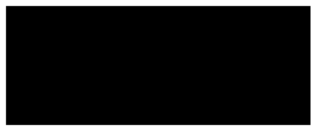

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the practices of individuals in Dili, Timor-Leste using Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Education Resources (OERs). It draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Dili, the capital city, between 2015 and 2017, including participant observation and interviews. It details participants' internet use, their experiences of open online learning and their motivations for study, using individual participant portraits to illustrate broader themes from the data. The concept of *Southern agency* is introduced, defined as an individual's actions within the particular constraining and enabling forces that define life for many in countries of the global South. It takes inspiration from Connell's *Southern theory* applied to orthodox practice theory, interpreting participants' structured, cultured actions as they seek educational opportunities, their daily choices and decisions, motivations, and the creative improvisations they employ as they look to achieve their aspirations.

The first chapter introduces the project and research questions, with a series of ethnographic portraits representative of the cohort for this work. The second chapter introduces the theory of Southern agency as an analytical tool for investigating the practices of Timorese people and their uses of the internet to grasp educational opportunities. Chapter 3 provides sociohistorical context for the research in Timor-Leste, using the concept of the *eduscape* to trace global to local flows of ideas, policies and practices in education, grounded in 500 years of colonisation and resistance. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach to the research, acknowledging the need to decolonize research methods before describing the field and the author's position within it. It reviews the research methods used to collect data, including participant observations and interviews with individuals and small participant groups, before explaining the challenges to conducting the research.

The second part of the thesis includes four papers published in international journals and one in conference proceedings. Chapter 5 is a systematic review of the published literature on MOOCs and OERs for learners in countries of the global South. Five key themes emerge from this literature: access to the internet and the hardware needed to learn online; the literacies required to make the most of these resources;

the new, often unfamiliar pedagogies adopted by these forms of online learning; the importance of context of content; and the imbalances arising from the North-South 'flow' of knowledge and accusations of academic neo-colonialism. The paper also points out the absence of research into the lived experience of Southern learners engaging with these and other forms of online education. Chapter 6 applies themes from Chapter 5 to the Timorese context, describing the ways in which Timorese learners navigate barriers to internet access, drawing on a range of literacies to engage with often-unfamiliar online pedagogies. It then reiterates the need for courses designed for local contexts and emphasises the need for more Southern academic voices in open online education globally.

Chapter 7 is an account of the experience of blending a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) MOOC for English language teachers with a group of Timorese English and Tetum language teachers using principles of participatory, ethnographic action research. It identifies key benefits to participants, including providing quality, innovative learning resources with opportunities for collaboration and reflection, as well as developing subject-specific English language skills. It then describes key challenges for learners, including intermittent internet access, time management, course design and payment issues. The paper concludes by recommending that resources created with local academics, cognisant of these issues, would open up even more opportunities to access quality CPD education.

Chapter 8 is an ethnographic study of the experiences of three Timorese participants who used various forms of open online education to achieve their study and career aims. It applies Southern agency as a heuristic device to analyse participant practices, highlighting infrastructural challenges, support of family and kinship groups, the development of an interdependent suite of personal literacies and the colonial legacy as key influences on individual practice. Chapter 9 addresses questions around the popularity of international scholarships in Timor-Leste and details the experiences of a scholarship applicant, a scholar and an alumnus. Chapters 8 and 9 apply the concept of Southern agency to explore the aspirations, motivations and the strategies individuals employ to pursue education opportunities. Chapter 9 concludes that scholarships offer opportunities to a very small fraction of the total number of

applicants and reproduces the kinds of administrative roles familiar to the colonial era, before proposing that various emerging forms of online education could provide more scalable opportunities to improve higher education quality.

The third and final part of the thesis comprises Chapter 10, which outlines the contribution of the published chapters to the academic literature, before suggesting areas for future academic enquiry arising from this project: research into nascent open online learning programs in Dili, further study of blending MOOCs and OERs with face-to-face study meets, and investigation of the circular, conditional forms of mobility which international scholarships create. The thesis concludes with some reflections on Timor-Leste’s history and the possibilities for MOOCs, OERs and other new innovations in online education to play a role in its educational future.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the students and educators of Timor-Leste, working to improve their lives and the lives of others through education. It was a privilege to work with you, to talk with you and to listen to your stories.

A luta natafin!

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This thesis would never have been possible without my original coordinating supervisor Martin Forsey, who listened to my early ideas and helped shape them. He also co-authored three of the published papers and his input was invaluable. His redundancy and the dissolution of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at UWA in early 2022 came as a tremendous shock, and could have derailed this project if it had not been so close to completion. I would also like to thank Anne Harris, my manager at Edith Cowan University when I first undertook my PhD candidature, who supported my decision and offered sage early advice.

Special thanks to Mark Pegrum, for taking over coordination of supervision having previously been co-supervisor, and for helping arrange my transfer to the Graduate School of Education in March 2022, all while I was studying externally from the UK. Mark has been a constant source of academic and moral support, from reviewing chapter drafts to sharing relevant new publications, calls for journal papers and conference presentations, while offering sage advice throughout this project and co-authoring three papers. And to Tanya Fitzgerald, who joined as co-supervisor in early 2022, my sincerest thanks for taking on the task of helping bring this thesis to completion and suggesting new perspectives, which I believe strengthen the work. Thanks also to Elaine Chapman and Maïa Ponsonnet, Graduate Research Coordinators for the Graduate School of Education and School of Social Science at UWA respectively, for helping administrate my transition.

Many thanks to my collaborators in Dili, Bernadete Luan and Esperança Lopes at LELI school, who helped analyse the data for Chapter 7 and became close colleagues, as well as the teaching staff at LELI, many of whom participated in the research. Thanks also to Belina Maia, the manager of the English Language Centre, and Ezekiel Ribeiro from *Uma Amerika*, both on the Liceu campus of UNTL, who allowed me to work in their spaces and meet many of the students who would become research participants. Their insights and advice were vital to this research. A special

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And finally, I want to thank my wife, Katharine, for her unwavering support and patience. Over the past 7 years we have gotten married, migrated to the UK, I started a new career and had heart surgery, we caught Covid-19 – twice – and lived through three long London lockdowns together. I could not have done this without her.

Authorship Declaration: Co-authored Publications

This thesis contains work that has been published.

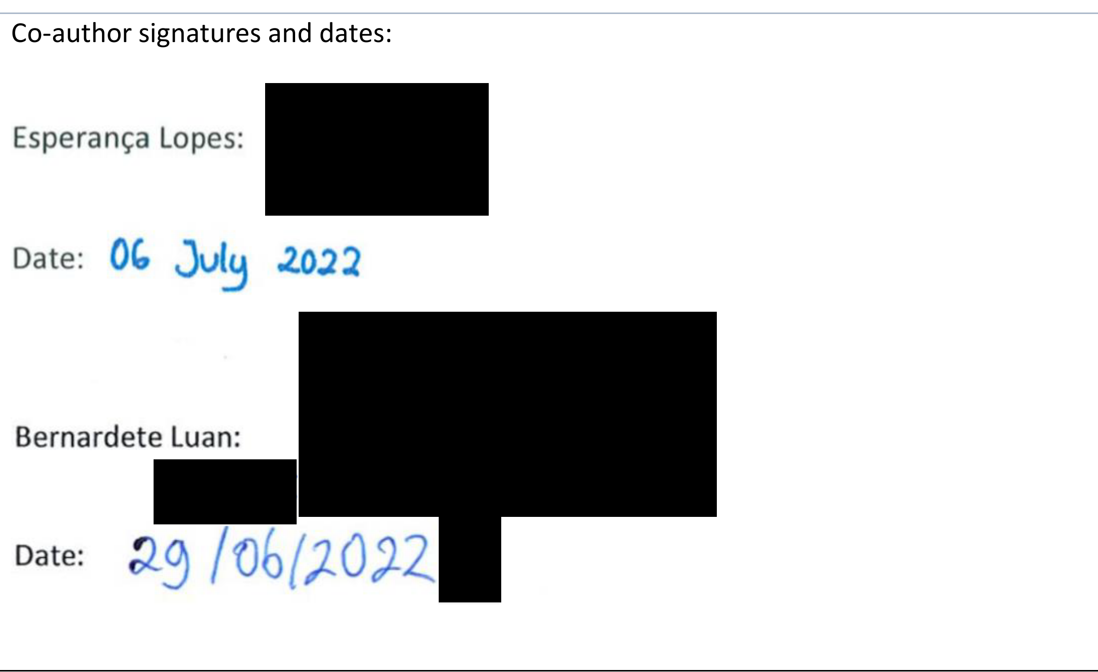
King, M., Pegrum, M., & Forsey, M. (2018). MOOCs and OER in the Global South: Problems and potential. *International Review of Research into Online and Distributed Learning*, *19*(5), 2–20.
This paper appears as Chapter 5
King discussed the early ideas for this systematic review paper with Pegrum and Forsey. The research design was discussed and agreed upon by the three authors, following which King performed the database searches, coded the papers and established the central themes of the literature on MOOCs and OERs in the Global South. King drafted the paper; for which Pegrum and Forsey provided feedback, some editing and suggested approaches to the discussion. King took the lead in responding to reviewer feedback under Pegrum and Forsey's guidance.
Co-author signatures and dates: 14th July 2022

King, M. (2019). Doing MOOCs in Dili: Studying online learner behaviour in the Global South. *Proceedings of EMOOCs 2019: Work in Progress Papers of the Research, Experience and Business Tracks*, 54–59.
This paper appears as Chapter 6
King was the sole author of this paper.

King, M., Luan, B., & Lopes, E. (2018). Experiences of Timorese language teachers in a blended Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). *Open Praxis*, *10*(3), 279.
This paper appears as Chapter 7

In this paper King participated in discussions with Luan and Lopes (two staff at Lorosa'e English Language Institute, Dili Timor-Leste) about the experience of blending a CPD MOOC with in-person study meets. The three authors together identified key benefits and challenges from the data based on a focus group interview with participants. King drafted the paper for feedback from Luan and Lopes, then responded to reviewer feedback before publication.

Co-author signatures and dates:



King, M., Forsey, M., & Pegrum, M. (2019). Southern agency and digital education: An ethnography of open online learning in Dili, Timor-Leste. *Learning Media and Technology*.

This paper appears as Chapter 8

In this paper King, Forsey and Pegrum discussed and developed the concept of Southern agency, King chose three ethnographic portraits from the data generated to illustrate and further develop this concept. King then drafted the paper, Pegrum and Forsey provided feedback on the drafts. King was responsible for responding to reviewer feedback, with Pegrum and Forsey's supervision.

Co-author signatures and dates:

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King, M., Forsey, M., & Pegrum, M. (2021). International Scholarships and Southern Agency: An Ethnography of Alumni, Scholars, and Applicants. *Journal of Studies in International Education*
This paper appears as Chapter 9
In this paper King discussed and developed the topic with Forsey and chose three ethnographic portraits from the data to explore the concept of Southern agency in relation to international scholarships. King drafted the paper and received feedback from Forsey and Pegrum, and King took full responsibility for responding to reviewer feedback.
Co-author signatures and dates: 14th July 2022

Student signature: Date: 19th July 2022
I, Mark Pegrum, certify that the student's statements regarding their contribution to each of the works listed above are correct. Coordinating supervisor signature: Date: 26 July 2022

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS ARISING FROM THIS THESIS

King, M.J. (January 2015) *MOOCs for development: Harnessing the potential for massive open online learning in the developing world.* Western Australian Teaching and Learning Forum, UWA, (Perth, Australia).

King, M.J. (June 2015) *MOOCs4Development? Action research into open online learning in Timor-Leste.* Timor-Leste Studies Association biannual conference, Universidad Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL). (Dili, Timor-Leste).

King, M.J. (June 2015) *MOOCs in Timor-Leste: The potential of open online learning.* Pathways to Education conference (Dili, Timor-Leste).

King, M.J. (June 2016) *Open online learning in Timor-Leste: Exploring the possibilities.* Presentation to UNTL academic staff, UNTL, (Dili, Timor-Leste).

King, M.J. (November 2016) *How can MOOCs extend the reach of education to rural and emerging Asian countries?* On stage interview with Associate Professor Mark Pegrum at Edutech Asia, (Singapore).

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King, M.J. (May 2017) *Change is inevitable, growth is optional: Using online resources for language teacher professional development in Timor-Leste.* English Language Teachers' conference at UNTL (Dili, Timor-Leste).

King, M.J. (August 2017) *Transforming education in the global South: An ethnography of open online learning in Timor-Leste.* Oceania Ethnography and Education conference, (Melbourne, Australia).

Ardavani, S (University of Aberdeen) and King, M.J. (June 2018) *Examining a MOOC-based CPD course for English Language teachers from two differing perspectives.* FutureLearn Academic Network presentation (London, UK).

King, M.J. (September 2018) *Transforming education: An ethnography of open online learning and its potential in the global South.* Oxford Ethnography and Education conference (Oxford, UK).

King, M.J. (June 2019) *Southern agency and boomerang mobility in higher education: Learning to return.* Rethinking Educational Ethnography (Graz, Austria).

King, M.J. (May 2019) *Doing MOOCs in Dili: Studying online learner behaviour in the Global South.* EMOOCs (Naples, Italy).

King, M.J. (October 2019) *Scholarships and student mobility in the Global South: learning to return.* Presentation at Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA19) conference, University of East Anglia, England.

King, M.J. (September 2021) *Doing MOOCs in Dili: Southern agency and open online learning in Timor-Leste.* Fogarty Foundation Postgraduate Research Forum, Perth, Australia.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS THESIS

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CAVR	Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor (*Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor-Leste* in Portuguese)
CoL	Commonwealth of Learning
CMP	Colonial Matrix of Power
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ERT	Emergency Remote Teaching
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FRETILIN	The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (‘*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*’ in Portuguese)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ICT4D	Information and Communication Technologies for Development
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
IOB	Institute of Business
IPPC	International Pediatric Postgraduate Certificate
LDC	Least Developed Country
LELI	Lorosa’e English Language Institute
LMIC	Low- and Middle-Income Country

LNGO	Local Non-Government Organisation
MAT	Timor Anthropological Mission (‘*Missão Antropológica de Timor*’, in Portuguese)
MHESC	Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Culture
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
MOOCs4D	MOOCs for Development
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OEP	Open Education Practices
OER	Open Educational Resource
RENETIL	Timor-Leste Students’ National Resistance (‘*Resistencia Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste*’ in Portuguese)
ROER4D	Research into Open Education Resources for Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SOLS	Science of Life Systems
SWP	Seasonal Workers Program
TLSSC	Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
UNAMIT	United Nations Mission in East Timor
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UNTAET	United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timo
UPOU	University of the Philippines Open University
VUSSC	The Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth

PART 1

Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the research project and its genesis in the author's experiences living and teaching in Timor-Leste. It provides definitions of MOOCs, OERs and the global South before outlining the development of the often-hyped narrative that these forms of internet-mediated learning are able to transform access to education in countries such as Timor-Leste, despite the clear challenges. The research questions are presented, followed by a series of portraits of the individuals who participated in this project, describing their backgrounds, aspirations, and the ways in which they use the internet, including open online learning resources, in their day-to-day lives. The chapter concludes with a detailed summary of the overall thesis structure.

1.1 Background

This thesis has its origins in my work as an English language teacher and school manager in Dili, Timor-Leste, between 2009 and 2011. Teaching brought me into daily contact with Timorese students looking to improve their English language skills, primarily for their careers and to pursue international study opportunities. Timor had been an independent nation for less than 10 years, and the United Nations maintained a large presence supporting the nascent parliamentary democracy. United Nations vehicles seemed to make up most of every Dili traffic jam, and cafés and bars were filled with a multinational array of staff from various international agencies, some in the familiar sky-blue uniform of peacekeepers. Dili is still dotted with reminders of its colonial pasts. In the waterfront area around the *Palacio do Governo* ('Government Palace' in Portuguese) a battered concrete memorial to centuries of Portuguese sea power stand near giant Indonesian occupation-era statue of a warrior breaking the chains of oppression, and an even larger post-independence memorial dedicated to the resistance struggle during the Indonesian occupation. There is even the rusting wreckage of a Japanese landing craft in the nearby harbour exposed at low tide, a reminder of that country's imperial ambitions in Timor during the Second World War.

Between 2012 and 2016 I worked as an academic learning advisor at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia, where I developed online study skills resources for mostly international undergraduate students. This work led me to begin investigating the opportunities for Timorese students to use these kinds of resources to access quality education opportunities. In 2012 the telecommunications industry in Timor-Leste was liberalised (Infodev, 2013), breaking the monopoly Timor Telecom had held since independence. Whereas previously a small local industry of internet cafés provided the most common means of access via ageing, dusty, virus-ridden desktop computers, new telco players entered the market and the price fell to as little as 20 centavos (the equivalent of 0.20 US Dollars) for an hour of Wi-Fi hotspot access. While desktop computers remained outside the budget of most Timorese, internet-enabled smartphones became available in the markets of central Dili for under $90 USD, alongside the local fresh produce and cigarettes. For the first time, the internet became affordable to a large proportion of the Timorese population, particularly those residing in the capital.

2012 was coined the 'Year of the MOOC' by the New York Times (Pappano, 2012), referring to massive open online courses, offering online learning experiences for free or low cost via aggregated learning resources including short videos, audio and text articles, with online discussions and automatically marked quiz-based assessment. These courses theoretically allow anyone with an internet-connected device to learn online. Many of the first MOOCs covered technical topics such as machine learning, but soon diversified as subject matter experts looked to reach new learner audiences and disseminate research using this novel approach. The popularity of MOOCs grew and platforms such as Coursera, edX and FutureLearn began reporting course enrolments in the thousands. However, this period of global MOOC hype was not to last, as early indications of course completion levels were low (Jordan, 2014).

Previously, Open Educational Resources (OERs) had risen to prominence in the field of online learning, broadly defined as "digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research" (OECD, 2007). The OER movement links to other Open Education movements including Open Education Practices (OEP): "the practices

involved in planning, creating, adapting, curating, sharing and reviewing OER" (Hodgkinson-Williams et al., 2017, p.31) which are key to 'opening up' higher education (Nkuyubwatsi, 2017). A large proportion of OERs are designed specifically towards self-directed learning, reflecting the pedagogic shift from teacher- to learner-centred approaches (Kanwar et al., 2010). This, together with the growth of MOOCs, has created a wealth of opportunities for independent, open online learning globally, and Chapter 5 reviews the literature on the problems and potential of these forms of online learning in the global South. OERs predate MOOCs and the distinction can be blurred, with critics such as Wiley (2015) arguing MOOCs have devalued the term 'open' in online education by monetizing learning, although Nkuyubwatsi (2018) demonstrates that a substantial proportion of MIT's Open Course Ware (OCW), one of the most popular OER repositories globally, is also behind a paywall. Most commercial MOOC platforms operate under a 'freemium' model whereby access to course resources is free for a limited time, but certification and permanent access requires payment of an upgrade fee.

Commencing my formal research, I returned to Dili to conduct ethnographic fieldwork three times between 2015 and 2017. I witnessed the subtle and less subtle changes in Dili since the withdrawal of most UN personnel after the final peacekeeping and political mission, the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT), ended in 2012. Traffic was still hectic, but the UN vehicles were replaced by (and in some cases relabelled as) *Kareta Estado* ('State Cars' in Tetum), driven by Timorese public servants. The cafés and restaurants once popular with expatriate humanitarian workers were now frequented by Timorese, and new, more affordable venues appeared such as Peace Coffee café in central Dili, where I interviewed a number of project participants. The economic collapse predicted by some resulting from the loss of UN staff spending in the local economy did not eventuate, which is not to say that the economic outlook is positive. As explained in more detail in Chapter 3, Timor-Leste remains heavily dependent on overseas development assistance (ODA) and is one of the most resource-reliant countries on earth, drawing on royalty payments from its oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. The Timorese I met and interviewed were mostly optimistic about the country's future, and they shared an almost universal desire to,

in their words, 'help develop my country' through their working lives and commitment to supporting their local community.

The further the research delved into the individual research participants' motivations for engaging with open online learning, the more clearly one key driver emerged: the desire to gain a place on an international scholarship programme to study abroad. This opened a new line of inquiry into the international scholarship system, with all of its attendant benefits and considerable limitations. These scholarships to wealthy countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and increasingly other regional neighbours including Japan, South Korea and China, offer a life-transforming opportunity for intercontinental and social mobility. Studying online has become a way of demonstrating competence and developing language proficiency, digital literacies and other academic skills to improve chances of success in annual scholarship rounds. This final research area, detailed in Chapter 9, provided an opportunity to scan the international education horizon and consider how open online learning might augment or in some cases replace scholarships, particularly in a post-Covid world.

1.2 Open online education and the global South

Open online learning has emerged as a major disruptor in the field of education in the past decade, sparking tremendous optimism around the potential for the internet to transform access to education globally. Much of this disruption has been driven by two phenomena, MOOCs and OERs, and their rapid evolution has had implications for the digital transformation of teaching and learning in higher education (A. Lane, 2013; Literat, 2015; Nath & Karmakar, 2014; Nkuyubwatsi, 2016a; Yuan & Powell, 2013).

The aforementioned explosion of MOOC enrolments in 2012 focussed academic attention on this form of open online learning. Early connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) were characterised by open access, use of web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and group chats to share content, and open-ended outcomes for the participants (McAuley et al., 2010). Later, 'extended' MOOCs (xMOOCs) emerged grounded in cognitive behaviourist pedagogy, characterised by a focus on teacher presence and

clearly stated measurable outcomes (Anderson & Dron, 2011). xMOOCs typically contain short videos with automated formative quizzes, self-and/or peer marking of assessments, and the use of forums for participants to discuss content and seek support, using broadly sound pedagogical foundations (Glance et al., 2013). Roberts et al. (2013) identified a new generation of hybrid MOOCs characterised by pedagogical innovation, and distinctions between MOOC formats have mostly disappeared in recent years. A subbranch of academic enquiry emerged exploring various possibilities for MOOCs to provide quality online education opportunities to learners in resource-constrained environments, sometimes referred to as MOOCs4Development (Castillo et al., 2015; University of Pennsylvania, 2014). Research began exploring potential for this open online learning innovation to transform education access globally (Daniel, 2012; Garrido et al., 2016; Nkuyubwatsi, 2016b; Venkatamaran & Kanwar, 2015; Wildavsky, 2014).

OER initiatives have a more established pedigree in international development contexts (Connolly et al., 2007; Kanwar et al., 2010; Muegge et al., 2008; Umar et al., 2013). Projects which have developed and evaluated OERs for teachers and students in the global South include the Research into OER for Development (ROER4D) (Hodgkinson-Williams & Cartmill, 2014), the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) (Murphy & Wolfenden, 2013) and its descendent TESS-India (Perryman et al., 2014). There is also a growing body of research into scalable learning experiences through open access MOOC architecture populated with OER content, leveraging the affordances of both MOOC and OER formats (Boga & McGreal, 2014; Czerniewicz et al., 2017; McGreal, 2017; Piedra et al., 2014), an idea also noted in Chapter 5 and 10.

With the rapid proliferation of MOOCs and OERs, industry leaders such as Salman Khan from the Khan Academy, Daphne Koller from MOOC giant Coursera and Anant Agarwal from edX – another major MOOC provider – pointed to the potential for MOOCs to revolutionise the way education is delivered globally. Industry leaders have been tremendously optimistic about the opportunities for these courses to help meet the growing demand for quality education globally. Anant Agarwal, the CEO of EdX, claimed that "[a]nybody who has an internet connection and the will to learn can access these great courses from excellent universities and get a credential at the end

of it" (Agarwal, 2014, n.p). Daphne Koller, the CEO of Coursera, went further, claiming "[m]aybe the next Albert Einstein or the next Steve Jobs is living somewhere in a remote village in Africa" (Koller, 2012, n.p).

Implicit in this hopeful outlook is the potential for MOOCs and OERs to help transform access to education in parts of the world that need it most. In the mid- 20th century, the term 'Third World' was devised to group countries not aligned to the capitalist 'West' and the communist 'East' at the end of the Second World War and the Cold War that succeeded it. The Third World was positioned in terms of the unequal relations between the powerful global centre, and countries at the periphery of global economic, military and political power, often former or remaining colonies of the West (Sajed, 2020). Usage of the term fell substantially by the new millennium, while concurrently use of the term 'globalization' increased (Tomlinson, 2003), and countries were more often assigned to the 'developed' and 'developing' world, reflecting the influence of free market theories of economic development. More recently the United Nations has coined the term Least Developed Countries (LDCs) while other international bodies such as the World Bank Group and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) group Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) based on economic benchmarks.

This thesis uses the term *global South*, defined by Dados and Connell (2012, p.12) as "regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized". A key distinguishing characteristic of almost all countries of the global South is their shared legacy of colonial occupation, usually by countries in Europe, which together with the United States form the core of the global North. Like the Third World, the term global South highlights the unequal power dynamics in the international system, and as the site of this project, Timor-Leste provides an illustrative case study of a country of the global South. It has emerged from centuries of colonial exploitation to become one of the world's smallest and newest countries, as well as one of its poorest, existing at the global political and cultural margins, facing an array of challenges after 20 years of independence.

Education is a central pillar international development and is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (UN General Assembly, 1948, Article 26). Improving the quality of education has been a priority area for overseas development assistance expenditure since the 1970s (Carbonnier et al., 2014). More recently, the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) announced in 2015 have provided a framework for measuring progress towards global poverty reduction by 2030 including through education. SDG 4, Quality Education, is divided into sub-aims. The following goals are of particular relevance in this thesis:

> SDG 4.3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.
>
> SDG 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.
>
> SDG 4.B: By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries.
>
> SDG 4.C: By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states (United Nations, 2015, pp.19-20).

These goals are clearly ambitious, with less than 10 years remaining for most to be achieved. The deadline for SDG 4.B, expanding scholarship enrolment numbers, has passed without any evidence of an increase, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) concluded that international

scholarships fail to assist students in areas with greatest need of educational support (UNESCO, 2020). Globally, overseas development assistance (ODA) spending on all forms of education has stagnated since 2010 (UNESCO, 2019), even as the demand for higher education places is projected to increase from 214.1 million in 2015 to 594.1 million by 2040, (Calderon, 2018). Most of this increased demand will come from the global South, as more students qualify for university places (Stamm, 2017), and the situation is no different in Timor-Leste, as outlined in Chapter 3 section 4. Clearly, new innovative approaches are needed to meet the growing demand for quality higher education in the global South.

International organisations such as UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) (Ally & Tsinakos, 2014; Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016) have called for further research to assess the potential for open online learning programs in the South to improve education quality at scale. The *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education* (UNESCO, 2016) called on signatory nations to:

> Develop policies and programmes for the provision of quality distance learning in tertiary education, with appropriate financing and use of technology, including the Internet, massive open online courses and other modalities that meet accepted quality standards to improve access (p.42).

Early research concluded that "[t]he individuals the MOOC revolution is supposed to help the most – those without access to higher education in developing countries – are conspicuously underrepresented among the early adopters" (Christensen et al., 2013, p.8). This low uptake was attributed to a range of challenges, including access to ICTs and infrastructure issues, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers, and problems around the use and reuse of online content (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013). For many observers of the early development of MOOCs in this space, the challenge lay in separating the 'hope' that MOOCs and their ilk could transform access to higher education in the global South from the 'hype' that accompanied it (Bartholet, 2013; Wildavsky, 2015).

The concept of international development has undergone extensive critique over recent decades, drawing attention to the power imbalances established and institutionalised through the 'development encounter' between the developed North and developing South (see for example Rahmena & Bawtree, 1997). Authors such as Arturo Escobar (1994) call for a decolonization of the development encounter, to dismantle the structures which have marginalised overseas development assistance recipients and promoted Western/Northern economic development as the standard to which all countries should aspire. In observing the processes that led to the drafting of the SDGs, K. King and Palmer (2013) noted the role of powerful international development agencies in driving the SDG agenda, concluding that "aid remains still a Northern preserve" (p.423). The concept of development in education is important but contested, requiring fresh, decolonial approaches (Rizvi and Moon, 2019), embracing a diversity of knowledges (Hoppers, 2020) and a social justice perspective (Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Tikly, 2019; Yoo et al., 2019).

A major criticism of the MOOCs4D movement aligns with broader critiques of technological solutionism, and the 'Silicon Valley narrative' that technology can 'fix' broken education systems (Weller, 2015). There has been a backlash against specious claims that MOOCs are a 'silver bullet' (J. Lane & Kinser, 2012) or 'panacea' (Christensen & Alcorn, 2014), leading to a simplification of underlying structural issues facing learners in the global South. Critics point out that Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D) education projects are seldom sustainable, treating development challenges as neutral, technical problems requiring technical solutions (Selwyn, 2012) and ignoring the fundamental daily challenges people face to get online and engage with digital technology, in languages they can comprehend.

Despite these criticisms of MOOCs and OERs, and the hasty, untested early predictions about their potential in Southern contexts, there is growing evidence of education projects in the global South which have successfully adopted open online learning formats, while cognisant of the power asymmetries they can reproduce. The University of the South Pacific produced a MOOC on climate change in the Pacific region, adapting MOOC architecture and course content to a Pacific context (Bhartu

& Naidu, 2020), while in 2017 a team from the World Health Organisation developed a MOOC on research and training in tropical diseases for learners in LMICs codesigned by experts from both the global North and South and produced in multiple languages (Allotey et al., 2021). These projects test the proposition that open online learning can help learners in the global South access quality education experiences, often connected to other SDGs such as good health and climate action, and in doing so overcome deeply entrenched socioeconomic, technological and other structural barriers, while acknowledging that variable degrees of access can reinforce these barriers (Valentin, 2015; West, 2015). As the 'year of the MOOC' hype subsided, pedagogical approaches were refined, and while the average number of learners on courses decreased, the quality of courses arguably improved as a result of experimentation with various pedagogical formats, including blending online content with face-to-face study (Haggard, 2013; Wildavsky, 2015).

The global Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the daily lives of the inhabitants of almost every country on earth, particularly in the provision of education. The pandemic has had a marked effect on teaching and learning in higher education, as educational institutions around the world have scrambled to adopt a range of online approaches. The MOOC aggregator classcentral.com named 2020 the 'second year of the MOOC', (D. Shah, 2020) following a resurgence of MOOC enrolments. A United Nations SDG report on the impact of Covid-19 (2021) believes improved global internet connectivity has a role in helping education systems 'build back better' in making up for an estimated 20 years of lost gains caused by the pandemic. The rapid pivot toward deeper institutional engagement with online learning has not been without its challenges, and poorly executed online teaching initiatives can have lasting consequences for learner perceptions of online education (Hodges et al., 2020, Moore et al., 2021: UNESCO-IESALC, 2022).

While Covid has caused major disruption to education at all levels, and online transitions were seldom without teething problems, education systems around the world are adopting online teaching and learning modalities. As Pegrum et al. (2022) point out:

> In the short term, education has had to adapt to global changes: during the COVID-19 pandemic whose virulent spread owed much to our growing planetary connectedness, education systems around the world switched rapidly to *emergency remote teaching.* Despite the pedagogical and other limitations of this rushed and underprepared shift, it has fast-forwarded the more gradual shift that was already underway towards greater use of online and blended (or hybrid) learning models (p.3).

Greater global exposure to online learning has accelerated the pace of innovation, and new pedagogical formats such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), described in Chapter 9, are starting to appear.

A number of studies of online learning in the global South acknowledge clear knowledge gaps around the lived experience of individuals in the global South looking to learn online. For example, Nti (2015, p.159) identifies "the need to consider how to better support access to content for the ultimate target end user – the learner, particularly, the learner of a developing country". Further, Zhang et al. (2019) argue that research into the learning experience of Southern learners needs to inform the foundations of MOOC design. Daniel et al. (2015, p.69) point out that "the MOOC movement has paid insufficient attention to the real needs of the developing world" and a report by the Advancing MOOCs for Development initiative concludes that "[v]ery little empirical research has been conducted to examine the experiences of MOOC students in lower-income countries" (Garrido et al., 2016 p.14). The papers that comprise the central section of this thesis aim to contribute to this emerging field, analysing the structural constraints on would-be learners and investigating the ways in which some individuals in Timor-Leste work within and around them to leverage educational opportunities through open online learning.

1.3 Conceptual framing and Methodological base

The conceptual framework adopted for this project is based in practice theory. The 'practice turn' has developed as an important theme in anthropology and sociology across the past 50 years, focussing on individual actions in dialectic interaction with

social structures, which produces practice (Ortner, 1984: Bourdieu, 1977). Post- and decolonial critiques of the countries of the global North as producers of knowledge, with individuals in the global South reduced to the status of data, have resulted in efforts to decolonize the means of knowledge production, as outlined in Chapter 2. This thesis bases its conceptual framing in orthodox sociology and practice theory, but looks to answer calls by Raewyn Connell (2008) and others to adopt Southern perspectives on knowledge production and distribution. Applying Southern theory to individual practice, this thesis proposes a new concept for framing practice in the global South; Southern agency, defined as:

> [a]n individual's engagement within the particular forms of constraint and opportunity that exemplify life for many in countries of the Global South. It is the mix of structured, cultured choices people face and their ability to work with the resources available to exercise power, limited as it may be (M. King et al., 2019, p.4).

Recognising the impact of colonialism and its differentiating influence in the contemporary structural realities of countries of the South, Southern agency is first presented and developed through the papers which comprise Chapters 8 and 9 (M. King et al., 2019, 2021).

Given the dearth of qualitative research into the lifeworlds of online learners in countries of the global South such as Timor-Leste identified above, this project adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection and interpretation. Ethnography has a long tradition in social and educational research, and the tools, including participant observation and individual and focus group interviews, provide a rich source of data for analysis. Online learning produces a wealth of learner data which can be analysed in myriad ways, part of the emergent field of learning analytics*,* and as a result much of the research into open and other forms of online learning is quantitative in nature. Data from a range of sources – video audience retention, quiz results or the pressure imparted in learner keystrokes – can be measured and analysed (Jarke & Breiter, 2019). Less is known about the individuals on the other side of the computer or phone screen. While instructive, quantitative studies cannot explain the motivations for learners who discover these resources, nor account for the large

proportion of learners who do not persist in learning via MOOCs and OERs. By taking a qualitative, ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis, detailed in Chapter 4, this thesis aims to bring focus to individual learners and their interactions with the various structural forces they encounter as they look to learn online.

1.4 Research questions

The central research question of this thesis is:

- How do people in Timor-Leste navigate the forces shaping their participation in higher education opportunities through open online learning?

A series of sub-questions guide the thesis:

- What are the key problems restricting the uses of MOOCs and OERs for learners in the global South? What potential exists for MOOCs and OERs to provide educational opportunities for these learners?
- How do these problems and potential manifest themselves in Timor-Leste?
- What forms of support most effectively help Timorese engage with open online learning?
- How have Timorese individuals successfully used MOOCs and other open online courses to achieve educational goals?
- What motivates people to apply for international scholarships and what do they gain from them? Further, what does this reveal about international education interventions from a Southern perspective, especially in a post-COVID world?

This thesis explores the practices of individuals working within an education system reproducing colonial-era power structures, fundamentally constraining that system and contributing to poor educational outcomes. Using Southern agency to investigate these practices, it argues that despite numerous challenges, open online learning could provide a scalar solution to transforming these structures and improving

educational quality, without necessitating the significant effort for potentially no reward offered through the pursuit of international scholarships.

1.5 Portrait of a cohort

The participants in this project included students, teachers, university administrators and other education stakeholders in Dili, Timor-Leste, as well as scholarship students based overseas. The students and alumni moving, or at least attempting to, between home in Dili and abroad are the prime focus, and their experiences of formal study and less formal learning experiences, online and offline, are central to this thesis. These individual stories, provided in no particular order, provide individual case studies, which add context to the broader study and are referenced primarily in the Chapters 2-4. The following individual portraits (all names are pseudonyms) ground this work in the lived experience of individuals and set the scene for the chapters to follow.

Vasco

Vasco tells the story that as a child he first discovered the prestigious university he would later attend in the pages of a *Reader's Digest* magazine that had somehow made its way to his small village in the mountains of central Timor-Leste, the largest of which is named Mundo Perdido, ('Lost World' in Portuguese). He spent his childhood living under Indonesian occupation, where soldiers would make him do push ups before allowing him to leave the village, and he aspired to travel beyond his small community to this famous UK university to study. He was in high school as the events of the late 1990s unfolded and the people of what would become Timor-Leste would be given a referendum on independence. Vasco realised then that English would be a crucial language to speak in order to make the most of opportunities.

By improving his English language skills and taking employment opportunities that arose, starting as a volunteer, he was able to build cultural capital, making him more attractive in the employment market. He was very strategic about the work and study choices he made; his first trip overseas was an 8-month study fellowship to

South Africa, which strengthened his applications for other scholarships, and he was then accepted into a program to study at undergraduate level in the United States. At the end of this degree, he began looking at further study opportunities abroad, and he successfully applied for an Erasmus postgraduate scholarship, enabling him to achieve his ambition to study at a preeminent university.

When asked about the issues with the quality of education in Timor-Leste compared to his experience overseas, he had this to say (all quotes are reproduced verbatim):

> Partly I think it's attributed to people's inability to think critically, but I also blame that a little bit on our education system, right? You need to teach people about how to think critically, about how to not take information that is presented to them on face value. And also like in the States or in the developed countries – you are taught about – people really take seriously plagiarism. And what does it mean? I really doubt that in Dili they are versed in that training. And the emphasis should be, people should be taught that it's OK that you use a reference as long as you give it due credit, and use it to shape your own thinking. Knowledge is dynamic, right? You read something and it should create some questions in your head like 'OK, but my experience shows this, or I read this book and it shows this', it should be used as a stimulus for you to think critically beyond what you read.

In September 2018 I presented some of my research at a conference at the same university at which Vasco had studied his postgraduate degree. I knew Vasco was in town, though he had finished his studies, so I asked if he would like to watch my presentation. He was doing a research consultancy for a local policy centre and was free that afternoon. It was a slightly surreal experience to present my work in such an auspicious location, with Vasco seated in the audience enjoying the presentation and taking photographs, including the one below.

Figure 1

The author presenting at a conference in the UK, September 2018 (author's photo, taken by Vasco).

After the presentation we decided to go for a walk around his college in the autumn sunshine. We walked past groups of tourists crowded around various buildings and he explained that the sites were now famous because of their appearance in the Harry Potter films, which neither of us had seen, but it was amusing to wonder what significance these sites had to them. He described to me some of the traditions in his college, including the requirement that students wear certain clothing to exams. He said that where he was from in Ermera district, Timor-Leste, they were famous for having many often-expensive local customary practices, but not as many as here. He explained with incredulity the complex rules around the colour of ties, shoes and gowns students in different years need to wear to exams. Vasco returned to Timor-Leste in 2019 and is the country manager for a major international non-government organisation in Dili. His story is elaborated further in Chapter 8.

Emiliana

Originally from Manatuto on the central north coast, Emiliana was the first participant to attend a weekly open online learning drop-in session I organised in 2017 at the *Uma Amerika* ('America House' in Tetum), an internet access hub and library funded by the US State Department on the grounds of UNTL which is described in more detail in Chapter 5. The building houses approximately 10 internet-connected computers, open for visitors to book in 30-minute increments, and I used this time to introduce interested students to various OERs and MOOCs depending on their areas of study and personal interest. She explained that she was a second-year midwifery student at UNTL, and wanted to know more about the study of midwifery overseas. Like many students in Dili, she had settled in the capital to complete her university studies, supported by her extended family. She spoke five languages; Tetum, Portuguese, English, Bahasa Indonesia and a local dialect, Galolen, not an unusual number for Timorese given the linguistic diversity across the country. She had also started Japanese lessons in her spare time and sometimes attended the evening English Conversation Club at UNTL. While other participants were often reserved in first meetings, she exuded confidence and seemed to relish the opportunity to practice her English with me. She encouraged her friends to come and join her in meeting me at the *Uma Amerika* but they never came. She enjoyed her studies but found them challenging; there was a lot of theory to learn and students didn't attend a birth as part of a practicum until their final year of study. The textbook was in Portuguese and she didn't always feel she understood the more technical medical language, but she was determined to work through the readings, learn the various theories and prepare herself for the world of work as a midwife.

We took a seat at a computer and after a brief internet search found a free 4-week introductory MOOC on midwifery provided by the University of Newcastle, Australia, on the now-defunct Open2Study platform. I helped her through the process of signing up for and logging on to the course and together we watched the first video with the English subtitles switched on to aid her comprehension. Each video had a single multiple- choice question after it; Emiliana clicked through to the question, read

it carefully, speaking the words softly, then paused to consider her answer. It was a yes/no option question, she made her choice, reconsidered for a moment, then stayed with her first choice, which was correct. She smiled and moved on to the next learning task. After watching three more videos in her 30-minute session, she planned to try to access the course using the free Wi-Fi at the Timor Plaza shopping mall closer to her home, but discovered the connection was not strong enough to download videos.

For the next month I saw her almost weekly in *Uma Amerika*. She continued to encourage her midwifery colleagues to come along but they were always busy – I suspect they lacked the confidence in their English language ability to speak to a *malae* (the Tetum word for foreigner or outsider, explained further in Chapter 4). On some days the internet connection was strong enough for her to download the videos, on others she read the transcripts, and at times the connection was not strong enough to load the course home page. After six weeks we checked her progress; she had completed one of the four weeks, but the course access had expired and she could no longer access the materials. I apologized and explained that she wouldn't be able to gain a certificate for the course, something other students had expressed particular interest in. When I explained this in an interview and apologised, she looked surprised and replied: "It's OK for me – it's not important about the certificate, important is how I can know this lesson – it's very important." In this regard Emiliana's attitude differed from other participants in online courses offering certification (for example Rosa in Chapter 9). Some participants sought to accrue cultural capital– evidence of learning to prove their credentials with scholarship recruiters. Emiliana's motivation was simpler; she was curious as to what midwives in Australia studied, and despite the challenges, she had achieved that aim.

> I think it's very exciting to me… with this course I learned more vocabulary, I can improve my English, and I can also improve my lesson about the midwifery, and it's very good for me.

My last contact with Emiliana came via Facebook, when she posted that she was representing Timor-Leste at a young women's leadership conference in Thailand in August 2022. We chatted briefly via Facebook Messenger and she explained that she enjoyed participating in panel discussions with other participants from throughout the

southeast Asian region, and the opportunities to meet other young women and learn together.

SIMAO

A friend I met for coffee in Dili one day during the final month of field research told me I should speak to Simao about studying online. We first met in the outdoor area of a local NGO in Dili where he was hosting weekly karaoke nights to raise money to study at Binus, an Indonesian online university attracting some student interest in Timor-Leste. He spoke good English and was mostly self-taught, having worked for another local civil society organisation that published much of its work in English. Binus university offers online degree courses in Indonesian, which Simao spoke fluently, however examinations must be taken in person, so in addition to the course fees, he needed to raise money to fly to Jakarta to sit exams in person, and to cover his costs while there.

Simao was in his late 30s and older than most of the student participants in the project, having completed high school before the Indonesian withdrawal in 1999. For many of his generation, the decision to leave rural districts and travel to Dili to study under military occupation was not an easy one:

> You know, to participate in education, for my education it was not easy during the occupation times because of political situation, and economic situation, in Indonesian time it's not easy to leave your village and come to Dili. Even just, when you finish your primary school, you need to make a choice; stay in town or look in school in Dili. But if you come to Dili, you have problems because Indonesian military it also has operations in Dili and for family we decided, OK we want you to study but we don't want you to lose your life, so they prefer me to stay.

He came from Lautem, the Fataluku-speaking municipality to the far east of the country, and maintained strong connections with family and extended kinship groups with connections both there and in Dili. Simao was tech-savvy and described how he live-streamed a presidential address online using Facebook Live, enabling

participants in the far east of the country to ask questions of the president in Dili in real time. He had heard of MOOCs and admitted they were an interesting development, but they were not for him. First and foremost, he needed a meaningful qualification, and without this it was not worth the investment of study time. Binus offered the convenience of online access to education (travel to Jakarta notwithstanding), with the social capital of a recognised qualification he could trade on the job market. The physical pieces of paper – certificates of completion, attendance at trainings and degree qualifications – remain important evidence of education, and job applications in Timor-Leste are regularly accompanied by a neat stack of these papers.

Simao faced difficulties difficulty saving money to study; as a wage-earning man many family costs fell to him, including the recent funeral costs for an uncle. A coffin can cost up to $500 USD and the community expects the funerary celebrations to match the position of the deceased person. In local custom a buffalo is slaughtered for the funeral meal and the horns then adorn the gravestone; the larger the horns, the more important the person and a large buffalo can cost hundreds of dollars. Costs of these customary observances were identified as a major financial burden for many project participants.

Simao had never applied for an international scholarship, although he admits if he was offered one, he would probably accept. He has strong feelings about some scholarship alumni he has encountered in his work, and finds they feel they can weigh in on issues in meetings that are outside their area of study, yet because they were educated overseas their opinion receives greater consideration, regardless of its merits.

JOAO

Joao was originally from Ermera municipality in the central highlands of Timor-Leste, where his family farm vegetables and a little coffee, and returns there a couple of

times a year to visit family and observe various local customs. In junior high school he moved to Dili to live with his extended family and go to high school in Comoro near the centre of town. This is where he first studied English, adopting a novel approach to practicing his skills with his friends.

> Well as when I was in high school, I used to make discussion with my friends, and we had a group inside the classroom, you're not allowed to speak Tetum. Because if you were to speak Tetum, you would probably have to pay. That's a good way to improve.

He completed his undergraduate studies at UNTL and was a regular attendee of the English Conversation Club (ECC), where he and his friends sought opportunities to improve their English wherever they could and he volunteered as a classroom assistant at the English-speaking International School. In an interview in 2016 he told me about how he used the internet to practice his English and resources from the Khan Academy – an online repository of learning resources – to practice maths equations. He explained that he rarely accessed the Khan Academy videos due to the instability of his internet connection, but completed the problem sets to practice and check his answers.

Joao tried to use UNTL's limited Wi-Fi and most often booked time at the *Uma Amerika*, and sometimes visited the Xanana Reading Room, a library and internet access hub funded by the New Zealand Government (described further in Chapter 4), to go online there. His friend worked in the office of one of the major Dili supermarkets along the Comoro Road, and after hours this friend allowed him to sneak in and use a reliable connection. Joao has a smart phone, but he seldom has enough credit to access the internet. He sometimes accessed the free Wi-Fi in the Timor Plaza shopping mall, and the Wi-Fi hotspot in the *Largo Lecidere* area on the city waterfront, though it was only reliable when there were fewer people there.

When we spoke again in-person in 2016, Joao described his ambition to work in a foreign embassy or an international organisation like the UN. This is a common ambition for university students attracted to the security and salary offered by such posts. Embassy and international development staff earn considerably higher salaries

than 'national' staff, with opportunities for international travel and study. Scholarship alumni are prime candidates for these positions with their higher English or Portuguese language skills and experience from study abroad.

He was actively searching for opportunities for international scholarships, and had applied to a number of programs, without success. In 2015 he was shortlisted along with approximately 50 students for an international scholarship with an eight-step process, including a pre-screening test, preliminary interview and two weeks of intensive preparation for academic International English Language Testing Scheme (IELTS) exam, the main English language assessment for international scholarships offered in Timor-Leste. He scored well in the Reading, Writing and particularly the Speaking exams but did not do well in the Listening exam, and he was not selected. He decided not to apply for scholarships in 2016 and focussed instead on his university studies.

Joao went on to complete an honours degree in social media and cyber-crime at UNTL and he plans to do postgraduate study and work in the small information technology industry. When I spoke to him in mid-2021 over a scratchy internet connection he was in Peace Coffee café next to UNTL as we spoke on FaceTime. He was applying for the Australia Awards scholarship, and wanted to study a Master's in cybersecurity and public policy at the University of Melbourne or Adelaide. A press release from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) confirmed that there were a record number of 368 applicants for the Australia Awards, with up to 20 places available (Australia Awards, 2021), with the number of scholarship places only slightly higher than the previous year. I proofread his personal statement and offered feedback, and a month later, he messaged me to say he had been unsuccessful in his application, but he was planning to apply for the United States-Timor-Leste (USTL) scholarship and the New Zealand equivalent later in the year. He was waiting on feedback from his application to see what exactly he needed to do to improve his chances in the next selection round.

Melati

Melati was another regular at the English Conversation Club at UNTL, and was keen to improve her English skills to improve her employment prospects and to apply for international scholarships. Her parents were originally from Indonesia and they moved to Kupang in Nusa Tengarra (West Timor) after the 1999 referendum, when she was seven. Her father worked as a postman and her mother worked for a telecommunications company while she continued primary and high school in Indonesia, including studying English before returning to Dili in 2011 after her parents had returned in 2010 to make sure it was safe for the family. With her parents now retired, and Melati is keen to not be a burden on her family:

> I'm not continue to college because I want [to] be responsible to myself, I don't want to use my parents' costs. Now if I find work, I will collect my money to go to college and have great teachers to get a scholarship abroad.

She explained how different family members, including brothers and sisters, had supported her through her education, recognising her academic talents and investing in her future.

Melati owned a basic smartphone and used it to communicate with friends and family, as well as using Google to search for information and watch videos in English on YouTube to improve her language skills. She had the password for a neighbour's Wi-Fi connection and 'borrowed' their connection, although with electricity shortages in her suburb and intermittent blackouts, it was often difficult to get online. She had studied basic computing in high school in Indonesia, and learned how to use basic Microsoft Office suite applications like Word, Excel and PowerPoint.

Students such as Melati and Simao from Timor-Leste's *Geraçao Foun* ('New Generation' in a mix of Portuguese and Tetum) had experienced significant disruptions in their primary and secondary education, due to the violence and destruction wrought at the end of the Indonesian occupation in 1999, as well as the political unrest in 2006 and 2007. Students described leaving Timor-Leste to continue their education in Indonesia, usually in Kupang in West Timor or in Java. Some, such as Melati, completed their high school in Indonesia and returned, while others went on to study at universities there. These more complex patterns of regional educational mobility

remain common today, as families look to provide opportunities to their children outside the local higher education system. Other common trajectories are via the Philippines, where the cost of a private tertiary education is significantly lower that other destinations; via the Catholic church and the seminary, where young male scholars train for the priesthood; and via coveted international scholarships.

Melati has a very clear aspiration for the future, which she described in a small group interview with two other conversation club regulars:

> In the future I have a dream to become a diplomat... and my plan is after I complete my study in future I'll come back to my country and help out my government to introduce my country especially about the tourism about the culture because I think culture is identity of the nation.

This is one example of participants' desire to "help out my government", to 'give back' and contribute to Timor-Leste's development, which appears regularly in the data collected for this thesis. When contacted via Facebook in mid-2022, Melati reported that she was no longer studying, and was picking up casual work contracts as a survey enumerator collecting data for various health and disaster management programs in Timor-Leste. She had not been successful in applying for an international scholarship, but she still holds an aspiration to join the Timorese diplomatic corps. With a limited supply of scholarship places available, and many programs favouring alumni from other programs or only targeting government employees, the chances of Melati and those in similar positions achieving their educational aspirations are slim.

Zé

Zé was another regular visitor to the *Uma Amerika*, looking to prepare for the annual rounds of international scholarship intakes and meeting with friends. He joined a study group working through the modules in a MOOC on preparation for the IELTS exam offered online by the University of Queensland, Australia entitles *IELTSX*, hosted on the edX MOOC platform. Our interview began like many others with scholarship hopefuls. Zé had a reasonable grasp of English with more fluency than accuracy in his

speech. His answers to the initial questions were a little disjointed – and then I asked him the question he was waiting for:

> Monty: What would you like to do in the future?
>
> Ze: OK, let me talk about the course and after I'll talk. Hang on – I can [pause] Actually – I'm interest in taking the opportunity to attend the IELTS preparation course because I have a full desire to pursue a degree abroad - ideally in English speaking countries. And another reason [is that this] opportunity [is] the answers to my prayers and the opportunity of a lifetime. For years now I have had a strong passion for fashion and with this growing frustration because I can't fulfil my dreams in Timor-Leste, and we don't have the necessary courses in our universities for me to follow my talent and eventually open my own fashion design business. So, I decided some times ago that I was prepared to do whatever it took to reach my dream even if it meant leaving my family and studying overseas. So, if I was granted a scholarship, I would take my study very seriously and work to my maximum to receive the results I need. And with a degree in fashion design from the United States or overseas I could come back and begin my business with the benefits flowing on to my family and the people of Timor-Leste. That's it. (laughs)
>
> [Laughter]
>
> Monty: That's fantastic - how long have you been practicing that?
>
> Ze: Mmm, about two weeks.

The performative nature of Zé's preprepared, memorised response to the question, with its mix of idiomatic, aspirational language, is fascinating in that he, more explicitly perhaps than other participants, saw this ethnographic interview as a chance to practise his scholarship interview skills, a point discussed further in Chapter 4. He had a very clear plan for his future, forging a career in the fashion industry as a designer incorporating Timorese textiles into his work. He travelled to Bali, a 90-minute, USD $150 flight away to attend fashion events and had a group of colleagues there who were very supportive of his work. His strong conviction and clear self-belief were admirable, and he was laser-focussed on achieving his aspirations. Among his

most treasured personal possessions was a rose gold iPhone– the only one like it I saw in Dili– which an Australian friend had given to him to help him keep in touch via online messenger services and Facebook.

As part of the listening exam preparation in the *IELTSX* course, learners were encouraged to develop their notetaking skills to improve their chances of a higher score. Notetaking is a key academic skill, but Zé was not very interested in it. When he didn't bring a notebook to a blended course study meet at *Uma Amerika*, I urged him to practice notetaking, explaining that if he didn't have a written record of important ideas presented, he would be unlikely to remember them, but he was unconvinced. He took a pad of Post-it notes on the table and tried noting down important ideas but he soon stopped and he left the paper behind when he left the study meet. I took a photo of the notes on my phone, which included a couple of lines:

> Scaning? [sic]
>
> Read quickly
>
> Find specific
>
> Format

While Zé was keen to try these courses, he was less interested in the methods to record and revise new information, as his attempt demonstrates.

These stories highlight provide a prelude to some of the themes arising from the ethnographic data collected for this project; the emerging use of digital technology to learn online, the creative ways in which participants negotiate the barriers to access the internet and the high levels of interest in international scholarship opportunities. These individuals provide personal context throughout the first section of the thesis, particularly in developing the concept of Southern agency. The next section previews the overall structure of this thesis and the approach to answering the research questions.

1.6 Thesis structure

The thesis is presented in three parts. Part one consists of four chapters including this introduction, the conceptual framing for the research, the qualitative methods

applied, and an exposition of the Timorese educational environment. The second part contains five chapters – previously published in academic journals and conference proceedings – which detail the results of, first, a systematic review of the literature, then ethnographic and participatory action research. The third and final part offers a discussion of the implications of this research for efforts to raise education quality in Timor-Leste and elsewhere in the global South.

Chapter 2, Conceptual Framing, provides the theoretical basis for the research and introduces the concept of *Southern agency* as a device for investigating and interpreting the practices of research participants looking to capitalise on educational opportunities. It begins with an introduction to the practice turn in anthropology and sociology, and draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice to conceptualise agency as inextricably bound within structures which both shape and are shaped by individual actions. It then introduces Raewyn Connell's seminal work *Southern Theory* (Connell, 2008), and her criticism of Bourdieu and other key contemporary social theorists for reducing individuals to the status of data sources rather than producers of knowledge in their own right. North-South dynamics are characterised by clear power asymmetries, individuals in the global South look to grasp the limited opportunities presented to them in various ways. Southern agency is proposed as a means of analysing these practices, exploring the choices and decisions, the aspirations formed and strategies developed, to try to reach those aspirations.

Chapter 3 then details the qualitative ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis, and its implications for research design. This includes the adoption of ethnographic action research (EAR) methods and the presentation of curated individual participant portraits, including those presented in the previous section, which serve as illustrative case studies offering more personal accounts of the challenges participants face and their often novel, creative approaches to tackling these challenges.

It acknowledges the emerging international movement to decolonize research methods, which is particularly important given Timor-Leste's history as an ethnographic field site. I consider my positionality within the project, as novice,

teacher practitioner/researcher, and outsider, before relating my entry into the field in and around central Dili, describing the key sites of data collection. I describe the ethnographic methods used, including participant observation, individual and small group interviews, as well as sociograms, and the chapter concludes with an account of some of the challenges of doing field research in Dili.

Chapter 4 presents a sociohistorical account of Timor-Leste and its education system, tracing its origins in the Portuguese colonial era, through the Indonesian occupation in 1975 and the resistance movement that emerged, to the UN transitional authority and the first 20 years of Timorese independence. Persistent systemic traits with origins in the colonial era are identified, notably the use of didactic, teacher-centred practices and the adherence to a reproduced ‘hidden curriculum’ which constrains both the teachers and students working in all levels of the education apparatus. The chapter concludes with a description of the contemporary Timorese education environment and the issues it faces in terms of the quality of education provision and access for the growing number of tertiary study-age young people attempting to enter university. As elsewhere in the global South, demand significantly outstrips supply and many students are unable to continue their studies due to a lack of places in the sole public university, or because they don’t have the funds to enter one of the growing number of private tertiary institutions. This chapter offers a brief assessment of the mostly unsuccessful attempts to move tertiary education online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and notes a number of online education projects, particularly in teacher professional development (TPD), which could help improve future education provision and offer a scalable solution to ongoing access issues across Timor-Leste.

The second part of the thesis includes five published papers addressing the research questions. Chapter 5, ‘MOOCs and OER in the global South: Problems and potential’ (a paper published in *the International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* with Mark Pegrum and Martin Forsey in 2018) is a systematic review of the academic literature on MOOCs and OERs for learners in countries of the global South published before February 2017. Five key themes emerge from this literature: issues surrounding individuals’ access to the internet and the hardware

needed to learn online; the literacies required to make the most of these resources; the new, often unfamiliar pedagogies adopted within MOOCs and OERs; the issue of context in relation to the local environment; and the imbalances arising from the North-South 'flow' of knowledge and attendant accusations of academic neo-colonialism levelled at these forms of online learning. The chapter notes the preponderance of 'top down' approaches to open online learning interventions imposed upon learners in the global South, reflecting a trend evidenced elsewhere in development literature. The corollary of this approach is the dearth of research into the lived experience of Southern learners engaging with online learning, a point noted by other authors. This gap is a key area addressed through this thesis.

Chapter 6, 'Doing MOOCs in Dili: Studying online learner behaviour in the global South' (a paper published in the conference proceedings of *EMOOCs*, Napoli in 2019), takes the five themes from the systematic review in Chapter 5 and applies them to the uptake of MOOCs specifically in a Timorese context, based on ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2017. It details the ways in which Timorese learners work around barriers to internet access, including the use of free or cheap Wi-Fi hotspots and clandestine Wi-Fi access. It identifies the demand for English language training, and the potential for online learning to help learners build on a range of language skills as well as a suite of academic and digital literacies giving learners greater currency in the local job market. It describes the challenges learners face to adapt to new and unfamiliar online pedagogies and reemphasizes the need for courses designed for local contexts, after pointing out the limitations of some attempts at online education interventions. The conclusion emphasises the need for more Southern academic voices in digital education globally, to prevent the development of academic neo-colonisation of Timor-Leste and countries elsewhere in the South in need of quality education.

Chapter 7, 'Experiences of Timorese language teachers in a blended Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for Continuing Professional Development (CPD)' (published in *Open Praxis* in 2018 co-authored with Bernadete Luan and Esperança Lopes), offers a preliminary report on using ethnographic action research to investigate the effectiveness of blending a British Council MOOC on English language

teaching with face-to-face study group meetings with Timorese language teachers in an English language institute in Dili. This is an emerging area of research, and has been described in other research as 'MOOC+', 'blended', 'flipped' or 'wrapped' MOOCs.

The study identifies key benefits to participants, including providing quality learning resources from an internationally recognised institution with opportunities for collaboration and reflection, as well as improvement in subject-specific English language skills. It then outlines key challenges for the Timorese learner/teacher cohort, including unreliable internet access, time management restrictions, and course design and payment issues. It concludes by recommending that resources created by local academics, cognisant of these issues, would create more meaningful opportunities to access quality CPD education.

Chapter 8, 'Southern agency and digital education: An ethnography of open online learning in Dili, Timor-Leste' (published in *Learning Media and Technology* co-authored with Martin Forsey and Mark Pegrum in 2019), is an ethnographic account of three Timorese participants in the research project who used online education in various forms to achieve life goals. The paper relates accounts of Rosa, a young student using the internet to improve her applications for international scholarships; Ines, a doctor studying a graduate certificate online as part of a professional development program; and Vasco, a scholarship recipient introduced in the Portrait of a Cohort in the previous section, who used an online English language exam preparation course to help him gain admission to a prestigious university. Applying the concept of Southern agency, this chapter explores both the restrictive and productive influences of local infrastructure, family and kinship group support, development of an interdependent range of personal literacies, and the enduring colonial legacy in Timorese society. Each story evidences a successful attempt to achieve educational aims through online learning, and while the chapter points out that these individuals are far from the norm, their stories reveal insights into what it takes for open online learning in Timor-Leste and other countries of the global South to be successful.

Chapter 9, 'International scholarships and Southern agency: An ethnography of alumni, scholars and applicants' (published in the *Journal of Studies in International Education* in 2021), shifts focus to examine the various international scholarships available in Timor-Leste, and explores the life worlds of three other Timorese research participants; Amelia, the founder of a local education NGO striving to apply for a coveted scholarship place; Maria, a scholar currently studying in New Zealand; and Octavio, a returned alumnus looking to help others improve their lives through education. Southern agency is again used to investigate the individual motivations, decisions and strategies adopted by project participants in an effort to leverage the benefits of international higher education. The influence of infrastructure, literacy development, family and kin, and the colonial legacy are further explored, here in relation to the challenging process of applying for international scholarships and the transformative experiences for those lucky enough to successfully negotiate the recruitment process.

The chapter concludes that these scholarships, while life transforming educational experiences for a limited pool of individuals, are not a scalable, practicable solution to the demand for quality higher education in Timor-Leste and elsewhere in the global South, and discusses the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on international scholarships. It is proposed that various forms of online and distance education, including blended MOOCs and virtual knowledge exchanges, where students in different countries share ideas and offer differing perspectives about a particular topic online, could give participants social mobility through quality education without the need for the international physical mobility traditional scholarships offer.

Part 3 comprises Chapter 10, which concludes this thesis, and summarises the contributions of the published papers to academic literature, with an account of the consequences for targets within UN SDG 4. It then proceeds to present three main directions for future research: the potential for MOOCs and OER to provide quality education at scale in Timor-Leste, based on two recent open online learning projects; the further uses of blended learning online with face-to-face interactions; and the deeper investigation of circular, conditional forms of mobility created by international

scholarships. The thesis concludes with reflections on open online learning and Southern agency in Timor-Leste and its future potential.

CHAPTER 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores Timorese experiences of education to consider how open online learning education can transform educational access. An exploration such as this requires a conceptual framework which enables a focus on the practical, day-to-day experiences of participants 'on the ground' in Dili, represented by the stories of individuals related in the previous chapter: the students in university lecture rooms and conversation clubs, looking to improve their lives through education. Research into the study of the educational uses of ICTs in the global South is a relatively new area of study (Daniel et al., 2015; M. King et al., 2018; Wildavsky, 2015) and a sociological practice-based perspective provides useful concepts for analysing the current and potential educational applications of open online learning resources in Timor-Leste.

This chapter introduces practice theory: the interaction of structure, culture and agency in social fields. It outlines the concept of agency as structurally and culturally mediated activity, and adds a temporal perspective, framing individual action as informed by an iterational past, an evaluative present and an aspirational future. It also emphasises the connection between agency and a productive rather than a wholly oppressive interpretation of power. Southern Theory is then explored in more detail, specifically, Connell's (2008) critique of classical social theory and its Northern theoretical focus. The next section reviews key research in areas including postcolonial, decolonial and other research challenging the hegemony of the global North and its Eurocentric ideal of modernity as the temporal and spatial cornerstone of the social sciences, providing alternative bases, including relational, ecological and historical. It includes examples of research into endogenous knowledge outside the global North and includes examples of knowledge recently produced in Timor-Leste, cited in this thesis, as evidence of a contribution to global knowledge exchange.

Using Southern theory and its call for a shift in theoretical perspective as a starting point, Southern agency (M. King et al., 2019) is then proposed as an analytical

tool for investigating the range of choices individuals in the global South face and the decisions they make, exploring their motivations and cultured, structured thinking that informs these actions. Southern agency focuses on the day-to-day lived experience of individuals in the global South and examples are employed throughout this chapter to illustrate its application, incorporating individuals' future aspirations, their present, often mundane exigencies and contingencies, and the iterative actions shaped by the colonial past, to build a more comprehensive conception of agentic action.

2.2 Practice Theory

Over the past half century, the notion of practice has emerged as a broad descriptor for studies of human action and interaction in the social sciences. Sherry Ortner's seminal article *Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties* (Ortner, 1984) records an important moment in the evolution of contemporary social thought. After tracing the evolution of major theoretical schools in anthropology, she signals a turn towards the study of practice.

> For the past several years, there has been a growing interest in analysis focused through one or another of a bundle of interrelated terms: practice, praxis, action, interaction, activity, experience, performance. A second, and closely related, bundle of terms focuses on the doer of all that doing: agent, actor, person, self, individual, subject (p.144).

Practice theory has since been adopted in sociology, and remains a productive branch of social theory capable of a range of research applications (Rouse, 2006). According to Peters and Tesar (2016), the 'practice turn' coincided with a move globally in higher education to absorb teachers' colleges within universities, which they argue triggered an important theoretical deepening of the field of education research (Peters & Tesar, 2016).

One of the major intellectual figures in the study of practice is Pierre Bourdieu, who looked to reconcile the inherent tensions between objective societal structures and subjective individual agency in accounting for human action (Bourdieu, 1977).

Bourdieu developed his theory of practice based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in rural Algeria, with 'habitus' being the synthesis of structure and agency within the body, not the meeting of dichotomous categories. Bourdieu uses the term 'field' to describe a social space in which human agents with varying degrees of power exchange various forms of capital in order to seek advantage. An example for the purposes of this project is the field of higher education, with the individuals working within it exchanging knowledge and other capital to then exchange for financial and other forms of capital as graduates in the wider world. Bourdieu described habitus as "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations demonstrated by human agents" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.78). It is the complex combination of mental attitudes and perceptions, embodied within individuals, which can appear physically in ways of "standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.70). Habitus offers a means of reconciling the dichotomy between structure and agency, objective and subjective, micro (individual) and macro (society) (Reay, 2004). An illustrative example of embodiments of habitus from the Portrait of a Cohort in Chapter 1, is Emiliana's disposition toward seeking new learning experiences through open online learning, or the idiomatic language scattered through Vasco's use of English, showing his cultural competence.

Bourdieu uses a Marxian interpretation of capital as accumulated labour, and includes traditional economic capital, but also cultural capital such as educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital can take the form of ownership of ICTs, as evidenced by Zé's prized iPhone described in Chapter 1 (see also Emmison & Frow, 1998; Kapitzke, 2000), the development and demonstration of individual digital literacies (Paino & Renzulli, 2013), and can also be embodied in people as habitus. Bourdieu conceptualised practice as the interactions between human agents within a particular field, bound in tactical exchanges with other agents, all bearing different levels of power and forms of habitus and capital, seeking advantage from these exchanges. Bourdieu's tools for social analysis have been widely applied in studies of education (Burnell, 2018; Forsey, 2015a; H. M. Gunter, 2000; Marginson, 2008; Reay, 2004; Tran, 2016), including research into digital technology in education practices (Beckman et al., 2018; Johnson, 2009). Through this approach practice becomes a

"practical, engaged social activity" (Robbins, 2010, p.37). Bourdieu applied his theory of practice in analysing educational fields, where he observed that education institutions, including universities, reproduce "the dominant culture, contributing thereby to the reproduction of the structure of the power relations within a social formation" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p.6).

More recent approaches to practice have focussed on the power asymmetries extant within any given social field, with Ortner asserting that practice is political – "reverberating with features of asymmetry, inequality, domination and the like in its particular historical and cultural setting" (Ortner, 1989, pp.11-12). It is "action considered in relation to structure… Practice emerges from structure, it reproduces structure and it has the capacity to transform structure" (p.12). Again, the tightly bound relationship between structure and agency is emphasised, as well as inviting the potential for individuals to affect transformative change within the structural realities they inhabit. Forsey's use of practice theory in recent work on the sociology of school choice draws on a Bourdieusian reading of practice applied to the often-mundane, daily decisions people make (Forsey, 2015b, 2020). It is now part of orthodoxy in sociology that structure and agency are closely interdependent (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sayer, 1990; Sewell, 1989)

2.3 Agency

Given the focus on the concept of agency within this thesis, it is useful to clarify its meaning within the context of practice theory, and to demonstrate how a sociological definition may vary, if only slightly, from the accepted meaning in other areas of study. A simple definition of agency provided by Ahearn (2001, p.1) is "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act". Emirbayer and Mische (1998) expand upon this by adding emphasis on time, denoting agency as:

> The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement, both reproduces and transforms

> those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (p.920).

Through what they term the ‘chordal triad’, agency is theorised as an interaction between past, future and present elements. There is the ‘iterational’ past, reproducing certain patterns of behaviour; individuals act in a particular way because that is how they have always acted. There is the ‘projective’ chord of individuals imagining future possible actions, what Ortner describes as “(relatively ordinary) life organized in terms of culturally constituted projects” (2001, p.80). And there is the ‘practical-evaluative’ present, incorporating past habit and future intent into the present.

Ortner relates agency to the exercise of power; agency denotes the capacity for action, and the more power an individual can attain, the greater that capacity. The concept of power and its distribution through society is often narrowly equated with oppression, however Foucault (1980) argues that power can also have a productive capacity.

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (p.119).

Foucault’s persuasively pragmatic view of power offers key insights for the ideas explored further in Chapters 8 and 9.

The concept of agency as conceptualised in other fields of social science can produce a liberatory interpretation of agency as freedom. Sen (1999), in his work on international development, defines an agent as “someone who brings about change” (p.19) and makes a strong connection between agency and freedom of action. Sen does not deny what he describes as “the deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements” (p.137), but this reading of agency assumes that actions which do not cause change are somehow not agentic. The stories presented through this thesis often depict individuals unable to effect the changes they seek, but

these are still examples of agency. These attempts and failures, as well as practices which demonstrate resistance to, as well as compliance with, the structural forces operating within their social environment, all comprise the range of decisions and actions that individuals engage in: a continual practice of "cultured, structured agency" (Forsey, 2015, p. 776).

By contrast, nor is agency solely a way of accounting for individuals acting against social structures that do nothing but constrain. Resistance may be a key element of agency, but it can also take the form of compliance, a desire to meet the conditions required by society to take up opportunities, including in the field of higher education. Agency represents individuals' capacity for action as both constrained and enabled by social structures in their efforts to progress through life. While practice theory has sometimes been accused of the same determinism perpetuated by structuralism, there is theoretical space here to allow that agency includes the capacity for transformative change in spite of structures, which can both constrain and enable action. It also allows the possibility that people act in their own best interests in various ways, and that compliance is a choice, even if it is culturally and structurally mediated. This is perhaps best demonstrated by participants such as Melati and Joao in the Portrait of a Cohort, looking to comply with the academic and other requirements for entry to international scholarships, discussed in more depth in Chapter 9.

Deeds Ermarth (2001) questions quantitative, objective approaches to conceptualising agency, and believes that "[t]he problem of agency needs to be rethought from the ground up, beginning with functional recognition that practice takes place in the discursive condition" (p.52). She argues for a more creative, personal interpretation of agency, described as "smaller, humbler, less passive, more creative, possibly even more effective" (p.48). This approach lends itself to a study of agency in the global South, where too often the personal, creative thinking behind individual actions is lost in the research data.

2.4 SOUTHERN THEORY

Southern theory is a theory of knowledge production, promoted notably by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in her work exploring the origins of social scientific thought in the global 'metropole', the centres of knowledge in Europe and North America (Connell, 2008, 2014, 2017). It is a call to redress the imbalances in the production and exchange of knowledge in the social sciences by acknowledging and incorporating Southern perspectives, particularly in relation to the impact of colonization on postcolonial societies.

It is important to clarify that the term 'Southern' is not geographically limited; Connell explains that it is not used to describe:

> a sharply bounded category of states or societies, but to emphasize relations– authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnership sponsorship, appropriation– between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery (Connell, 2008, p.viii-ix).

Connell argues that Southern knowledge is not a single homogenous body, and advocates a decolonization of knowledge production, including sociology curricula in higher education, to recognise and investigate theories of the social produced outside the global metropole (Connell, 2018). The emphasis on relations between centre and periphery, North and South, serves to highlight the need for more voices in this space, and for Southern perspectives to contribute to a more balanced, comprehensive and diverse global knowledge system.

In other work Connell and colleagues have addressed Southern theory and the global international higher education system (Connell, 2017; Takayama et al., 2017). Universities in the global South are important sites of knowledge production with a central role to play in rebalancing the distribution of knowledge and facilitating 'curricular justice', with Southern universities potentially able to "produce both locally relevant knowledge and a professional workforce" (Connell, 2017, p.5). The interconnected flows between global and local education policy, practice and ideas summarised in the term *eduscape*, extends Appadurai's concept of 'scapes'

(Appadurai, 1996), and is used in the latter part of Chapter 3 to trace global influences on the Timorese higher education system.

In *Southern Theory*, Connell critiques three seminal 20th century sociological texts and their theorising of the social. The first, *Foundations of Social Theory* by James Coleman, uses rational choice theory and mathematical modelling to map a vast array of social interactions. Connell describes Coleman's work as "a grand generalisation of the vision of people and social relations characteristic of modern neoliberalism" (Connell, 2008, p. 30). Connell argues that there is no accounting for the impact of the past in these social relations, it is entirely abstracted out. She then turns to Anthony Giddens' work *The Constitution of Society* (1984), which draws upon the western philosophical tradition to attempt a grand theory of the social, but Connell notes there are no examples of this theory in action in the global South, producing what Connell describes as "a universalised, completely abstracted, account of human development" (Connell, 2008, p.34).

Finally, Connell critiques the ideas presented Bourdieu's theory of practice in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) which drew on extensive ethnographic research into rural communities of the Kabylia people of Algeria. Connell's critique is that, as with Coleman and Giddens, Bourdieu universalizes practice to the exclusion of the colonial condition. Bourdieu's theory assumes cultural homogeneity, abstracting out crucial tensions in the social order. While Bourdieu wrote about colonialism and its effects on societies in earlier research (a point addressed below), it is conspicuously absent. Connell summarises Bourdieu's theory of practice bluntly:

> Knowledge about a colonised society is acquired by an author from the metropole and deployed in a metropolitan debate. Debates among the colonised are ignored, the intellectuals of colonised societies are unreferenced, and social process is analysed in an ethnographic time-warp (p.44).

Throughout this critique Connell adopts the metaphor of the map and diagram, whether it be the likeness of Coleman's representations of interactions to the steps of a waltz, to mapping the movements of a traditional gavotte in Giddens "executed by a ballroom full of well-trained dancers" (Connell, 2008, p.36), to a *dans*

macabre in Bourdieu's theory, where structures appear and disappear like apparitions. The totalizing logic of human activity reduced to this level of theoretical abstraction offers a universal theoretical view of human interactions, but Connell asserts that this universalizing elides the deep, enduring legacy of colonialism; a fundamental, persistent structural feature of societies in the global South.

While Coleman and Giddens drew upon mathematics and western philosophy respectively in developing their theories, Bourdieu's theory of practice was based in his ethnographic research in Algeria, which at that time was engaged in a bitter war of independence from France. A number of authors have attempted to resolve the issue of the erasure of colonialism from Bourdieu's theory of practice. Go (2013a) explores Bourdieu's work published before *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, such as *Sociology in Algeria* (1958), and argues that he sketched the formative principles of a sociology of colonialism. Go points out that Bourdieu's earlier work explores themes such as the dominance and coercive power of French colonizers over the Algerian people and the hybridity of the colonized subject, later adopted by postcolonial and subaltern theorists, even as they critiqued Bourdieu's later work. Go argues that:

> Bourdieu's early work should also be seen *as part of* rather than a target of a new project advancing a postcolonial and global sociology that reaches beyond Eurocentric sociological knowledge. (Go, 2013a, p. 67, author's emphasis)

Burawoy (2019) contrasts Bourdieu's work in Algeria with that of radical post-colonial thinker Franz Fanon, and proposes a definition of colonialism they could both agree on, as "a system of domination held together by violence" (p.80). This violence is not limited to physical violence, but also what Bourdieu referred to as 'symbolic violence'; the power exerted in this case by colonizers over the colonized through the administrative systems and other networks of control imposed upon colonial societies. Colonial systems produce structures which shape practice through oppression and resistance, requiring and often forcing individuals to perform certain actions. Vasco's story in Chapter 1 of needing to do push ups before being allowed to leave his village is one small, striking example of the power asymmetries which characterise the colonial experience for the colonized.

Southern theory proposes a realignment of knowledge production and a recognition and incorporation of other epistemic perspectives into a corpus of social thought representative of the entire globe, not just the universities and libraries of Europe and North America. Connell's criticism of these grand theories of the nature of individuals in society requires a rethinking of how to incorporate Southern perspectives into a truly global system, without jettisoning the entire sociological tradition (Buchholz, 2016). Instead, core concepts such as structure, agency and practice can be applied within contexts which acknowledge and actively address the living legacy of colonialism in the global South. Doing this requires adding a new perspective on the lived experiences, which is the aim of Southern agency detailed in section 2.7 below.

2.5 SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES ON KNOWLEDGES

In *Southern Theory* Connell advocates for an interconnected mosaic of perspectives on knowledge production beyond the global metropole to actively redress the imbalances in the global system of knowledge production and exchange prejudiced against the global South. Many of these perspectives have been provided by Postcolonial theorists, originating mostly in the Middle East and South Asia, including Edward Said and Subaltern scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Said pointed out that Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* makes no reference to the fact that the Kabylia people he studied were living under, and in some cases actively resisting, colonial French rule (Said, 1989). Decolonial scholarship, originating in the work of Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo and other scholars in Latin America have compiled a rich, diverse academic corpus interrogating the Eurocentric concept of modernity and the social sciences, offering further Southern epistemological perspectives. Together, postcolonial, decolonial and other allied theories offer "the possibility of a new geopolitics of knowledge" (Bhambra, 2014, p. 120).

Earlier theorists proposed radical change during the period of decolonization throughout the global South in the aftermath of the Second World War. A contemporary of Bourdieu in Algeria, Frantz Fanon, saw decolonization as a historical process "which sets out to change the order of the world" (Fanon, 2004, p.2), a 'disorganization' of colonial-era networks of power established to oppress the colonized. Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (2000) critiqued education a tool of colonial oppression, and proposed new liberatory, dialogic methods of teaching and learning. These ideas came to prominence during the period of decolonization across the global South, inspiring independence movements, including in Timor-Leste, as the Portuguese withdrew and in the early years of the Indonesian occupation, discussed further in the next chapter.

Connell cites the work of researchers based in the South preserving and promoting endogenous knowledges, including the anthology *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails* edited by Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1997). This study of traditional knowledge across Africa, from arithmetic systems to metallurgy and meteorology, reveals the extent to which this knowledge has been marginalised, including within Africa. Hountondji notes that the advent of the internet has allowed wider sharing of knowledge, but that it is primarily produced in the North (Hountondji, 2006). This issue has also been noted in OER production, where Southern learners can be marginalised to the status of knowledge consumers and data sources (Arinto et al. 2017).

The field of Subaltern studies, which rose to prominence in parallel with postcolonial studies in the 1980s, aimed to redress biases in the recording of histories of subaltern groups in India, with the aim of making colonized, marginalized individuals the subject, not the object of their history (Chakrabarty, 2015). Members of this group, including Dipesh Chakrabarty, critiqued Eurocentric perspectives on knowledge production to the exclusion of other societies, including in South Asia:

> I am aware that an entity called 'the European intellectual tradition', stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history… Sad though it is, one result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that

> the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only matters of historical research for most – perhaps all – modern social scientists in the region. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.5)

He calls for a conscious global shift to a 'provincialized', decentred Europe, not the epistemological metropole, but one of a multitude of global sites of knowledge production (Chakrabarty, 2000). Chapter 4 section 3 includes an account of how past ethnographic research in Portuguese Timor was used by the colonial powers to reinforce racial divisions and maintain colonial power structures: evidence of how a European power can marginalize and oppress through privileging certain knowledge discourses. Gurminder Bhambra (2007) has interrogated the temporal and spatial assumptions of European modernity as the cornerstone of the social sciences to the exclusion of non-European perspectives. She proposes a 'connected histories' framework, which encourages researchers to explore the shared links between local histories without resorting unreflexively to comparisons with Europe and North America (Bhambra, 2010).

In writing on postcolonial societies in Latin America, Anibal Quijano (2000) introduced the concept of 'the coloniality of power' to denote the establishment of independent nation states in the region inheriting and reproducing the systems of power which had governed interactions between colonizers and colonized. These new societies were never truly decolonized, swapping one form of oppression for another, establishing "a rearticulation of the coloniality of power over new institutional bases" (p.567). This created a 'living legacy' of colonial era power structures reproduced in the postcolonial period throughout the global South (Grosfoguel, 2002). The dynamics of the coloniality of power have also been examined by Walter Mignolo (2020) in studies of the practices of decolonising postcolonial societies. He uses Quijano's term colonial matrix of power (CMP) to describe these networks, and proposes adopting a *relational* approach to disassembling them. These CMPs can be seen in the governance of contemporary Timor-Leste; in its language policy and education system described in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue that reflecting on local colonial histories and examining how decoloniality is practiced in different societies encourages researchers to "enter into conversations and build

understandings that both cross geopolitical locations and colonial differences, and contest the totalizing claims and political epistemic violence of modernity" (p.2).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos outlines the issue of knowledge flows tilted toward the global North in contemporary social science and the fundamental biases in the social scientific tradition.

> The problem is the failure to acknowledge the abyssal line dividing metropolitan from colonial societies decades after the end of historical colonialism... All the generalizations of the western social sciences... are flawed to the extent that they take into account only the social reality of metropolitan societies, that is, the social reality on this side of the line (Santos, 2016, n.p).

He proposes an holistic approach to preserving endogenous knowledges in the face of imminent 'epistemicide' caused by the hegemonic forces of globalization, an issue also raised in the field of mobile open online learning (Traxler 2018). De Sousa Santos proposes an ecological model for global knowledge production and exchange, drawing on the principles of the *Buen Vivir* ('living well' in Spanish) movement originating among indigenous communities in South America. *Buen Vivir* is also championed by Quijano (2016), who describes it as a "an alternative form for social existence, as a De/Coloniality of Power" (p.11). A global knowledge ecosystem would set the conditions for cultural translation of knowledge globally, to champion 'cognitive justice' and improve mutual understanding (Santos, 2016). Rizvi and Choo (2020) advocate a contemporary interpretation of cosmopolitanism – a "plurality of cosmopolitanisms" (p.4) decoupled from its exclusively Western/Northern origins – to make sense of global intercultural exchange, including the dynamics of knowledge exchange through education.

In acknowledging the importance of this theoretical transition toward more globally balanced, interconnected, often ecological perspectives on knowledge production and exchange, it is worth considering contemporary research by Timorese researchers as contributing to this realignment. Research by the following three Timorese scholars is among examples cited in this thesis. Timorese anthropologist

Josh Trindade has produced research on Timorese traditional culture (Trindade, 2011), the revival of traditional practices post-independence and the ways in which "ideas about the future continue to be shaped by a shared cultural framework and vision for what constitutes a 'good life'" (Trindade & Barnes, 2013, p.58), offering a Timorese perspective on the *Buen Vivir* movement mentioned above. In the field of international relations, Laurentia Barreto Soares has contributed important research on the history of Chinese migration to Timor-Leste and its implications for current public diplomacy (Barreto Soares, 2019). Guteriano Neves is one of a number of Timorese civil society researchers monitoring government expenditure through analyses of annual national budgets (Neves, 2014, 2018) as well as reflecting on public policy research as a form of active citizenship (Neves, 2017). This research forms part of a growing body of research on Timor-Leste written by Timorese contributing knowledge at the local and the global level. For epistemological and cognitive justice to be served, it is essential that countries of the global South such as Timor-Leste have the opportunity to produce and share knowledge as part of an ongoing effort to rebalance the dynamics of global knowledge exchange.

2.6 Southern Agency

Southern theory and the concomitant development of theories through post- and decolonial thinking contribute to a diverse group of ideas sharing a common aim to interrogate the existing global dynamics of knowledge production. An important element of this enquiry is to examine how power asymmetries play out in the day-to-day lives of individuals in the global South such as Timor-Leste. Southern agency is proposed as an analytical device, particularly in Chapters 9 and 10 to explore agential action in structured fields where the odds are often stacked against success, but where individuals act to make the most of opportunities as they arise.

Using the principles of practice to explore and explain individual action within a given society, and acknowledging the detailed critiques of orthodox social scientific theory, Southern agency is proposed as a hermeneutic device allowing a deeper understanding of the particular combination of challenges and opportunities facing

individuals in the global South. It aims to capture the continuous strategies and often creative improvisations people in the global South utilise in order to gain and exercise power, limited as it may be. Following Deeds Ermarth's (2001) call for a more discursive interpretation of agency, Southern agency looks to the personal, the motivations behind decisions and the responses to forces brought to bear in countries of the South and the particular sorts of challenges and opportunities this context brings. In this project, Chapters 8 and 9 explore Southern agency applied to the lived experiences of individuals in Dili as they seek educational opportunity.

Ortner (1989) identifies four keywords for the discussion of contemporary practice theory. In addition to practice, structure, and agent she adds *history*, while acknowledging that this element is not addressed in Bourdieu's theory of practice. Ortner asserts that "it is only in historical contexts that one can see the relationship between practice and structure fully played out" (Ortner, 1989, p.12). The chordal past of agency outlined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) can be extended to iterational patterns of behaviour from the colonial and precolonial history, and this is central to conceptualising Southern agency.

This historical dimension provides deeper insight into the composition of Southern fields, accounting for the bumps and fissures riven into the postcolonial social fabric, including the Timorese eduscape described in Chapter 3. A historical perspective helps reveal the often-rough topography actors navigate and the peculiarities of this set of structuring conditions. In countries of the global South, the history of colonization is one marked by oppression, dispossession and marginalization, shaping the post-colonial journey, independence and national 'development', with its neoliberal, neo-colonial connotations (Escobar, 1994). As Quijano (2000) shows, colonial-era power matrices are consistently reproduced within postcolonial societies, binding historical context to contemporary socio-political reality. Southern agency aims to explore these often-hidden networks, which continue to act as structuring influences on individual decision making and action.

A straightforward example of Southern agency is the way some participants navigate infrastructural barriers to accessing a stable internet connection. As in many

countries of the global South, internet connectivity is unreliable in Timor-Leste, partly as a result of the lack of investment in the power network first built and then destroyed by the Indonesian occupying forces upon withdrawal. Individuals such as Melati and Joao know where and how to log on to free internet connections through various means, allowing them to study and access other online services that would otherwise be restricted to them. This is an example of the kinds creatively improvised practices people adopt to work within a set of constraining and enabling social conditions they inhabit.

Participants live these personal projects while inhabiting what McWilliam (2020) describes as a "customary modernity" within Timor-Leste, navigating the tensions arising from "negotiating the oftentimes conflicted priorities between personal aspirations and group obligations" (p.138). Melati's desire to not burden her parents and forge an independent career path despite the disruptions to her education described in the Portrait of a Cohort in Chapter 1 is an illustrative example of this. The power asymmetries among individuals in countries such as Timor-Leste are often amplified, the divides greater, the stakes higher, and individual actors look for opportunities to improve their situation through travel, employment and study, or a combination of these activities.

Southern agency in the future, projective sense concerns individuals' capacity to aspire, to imagine future alternatives for themselves by conceiving personal projects. Aspiration, like agency, is culturally embedded, and communities which nurture the capacity to aspire help frame individual aspirations in realistic terms, helping a shift "from wishful thinking to thoughtful wishing" (Appadurai, 2004, p.82). The study of practice involves translating understandings of individuals' navigation of external factors, and the internal forces empowering them to 'become' the person they aspire to be (Ortner, 1989b), and Southern agency includes this projective element of aspiration and the creative production of selves. The opportunities for people living with limited resources are limited, and the act of creating and working towards achieving life projects can often require great resilience, patience and tenacity. Appadurai makes it clear that people living in conditions of poverty "are neither simple dupes nor secret revolutionaries. They are survivors" (2004, p.65). The

survival skills individuals develop become practice as individuals navigate structured local educational fields littered with barriers constraining personal progress, as well as some resources which enable them to improve their situations.

In Timor-Leste, project participants regularly expressed a desire to transform their world and contribute to the development of their country by committing to studies, before working in key areas including education, health and community development. They viewed education as a pathway to help them create a form of self that would enable them to play a lead role in contributing to Timor-Leste's growth. Participants such as Vasco recognised an opportunity and made the decision to invest considerable time and effort in study to achieve their ambitions, inspiring others to follow their path. By contrast, Zé may not yet have achieved his life goals, but he can vividly describe his aspirations to become a fashion designer. He has a strong sense of who he would like to become, and sees open online learning as one potential means to propel him closer to that goal. Progress towards these goals demands personal sacrifice and resilience while requiring resources, often sourced from family and broader kinship groups.

The high levels of participant interest in international scholarship programs in this project speaks to the power of international education as a transformative educational opportunity, and these programs have important implications for Southern agency. Education has become a major driver of transnational mobility, often bringing students from the developing world to anglophone countries of the developed world (Rizvi, 2014). This mobility provides an opportunity for these individuals to engage in self-formation through empowering experiences of living and studying in multiple locations and hybrid cultural contexts (Marginson, 2014). Through the spatial and social mobility offered by international study, students have a greater opportunity to 'become' the person they aspire to be, accruing cultural capital and transforming their life possibilities (Tran, 2016). For the few applicants who receive them, international scholarships place considerable pressures on recipients looking to repay family support and succeed in their studies to meet scholarship terms and conditions (Baxter, 2019). In reality, the limited supply of scholarship places means many will never receive such an opportunity, despite their talents or commitment.

Individuals such as Joao introduced in Chapter 1 are faced with a choice to repeat the annual rounds of scholarship applications, committing considerable time, effort and finances, or like Emiliana, place faith in the local higher education system, even though they are often aware of that system's limitations. Ironically, after graduating from these transformative educational experiences, scholarship graduates often return to work in administrative government positions. As a form of Southern agency, the effect is to reproduce roles with strong echoes of colonial matrices of power, a point explored further in Chapter 9.

2.7 CONCLUSION

Like Southern theory, Southern agency is an attempt to redress the North-South imbalances in the production and exchange of knowledge. As Connell, Mignolo, Santos and others interrogate the hegemonic, totalizing influence of knowledge flows from the North and offer more globally equitable alternatives, Southern agency offers an opportunity to bring a Southern perspective on practice, foregrounding the ongoing, often unaddressed impacts of colonization on postcolonial societies. While Southern theory examines the global dynamics of knowledge exchange, Southern agency focusses on individual agents as they look to gain and exercise power within the particular sets of social conditions which constrain and enable their actions, allowing closer study of the dynamics of agential interaction. It invites a closer examination of the experiences of people living in the global South, not research participants as objects of enquiry, as data, but focussing on participants as reflexive subjects, weighing options and driven by particular motivations, looking to *use a world that's using them*, to paraphrase Ortner's (1989) aphorism.

In acknowledging postcolonial, decolonial and subaltern theorists' criticisms of the marginalising implicit in the production of knowledge in the North using Southern participants as data, Southern agency incorporates agentic elements of iterative past, aspirational future and practical, evaluative present in exploring the ways in which open online learning can provide education opportunities, and the concomitant potential for self-transformation. It is important to note the limits to truly decolonising

traditional social sciences such as sociology, and the research methods associated with these areas (addressed in the Chapter 4). Despite the various criticisms of theories of practice as abstracting the colonial experience out of conceptual frameworks of human interaction, there remain core concepts with useful applications in Southern contexts. Structure, agency, practice and related ideas can be productively applied to Southern settings, but they require refocussing. Connell shows that the authors of grand theories of the social in the 20th century wrote colonialism out of their theorising, and the additional perspective of history proposed by Ortner is a way of writing it back in.

The next chapter introduces the sociohistorical and educational context of Timor-Leste, one of the world's 'newest' countries emerging from over four centuries of colonization, first by Portugal and more recently Indonesia. The legacies of colonization, the violence – both physical and symbolic – experienced under colonial rule, and the matrices of power which persist in the post-colonial era, have shaped society and continue to impact Timor-Leste and its education system.

Chapter 3. The Timorese context and contemporary eduscape.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides sociohistorical context to Timor-Leste and its education system, beginning with the first institutions established by the Portuguese during their colonisation of the eastern half of Timor in the 18th century until their departure in 1975. It explains the use of education by the Indonesian military occupation as an instrument of oppression, in the face of determined local resistance. It then turns to the post-independence era and the efforts to develop a national educational system in the face of numerous challenges, including conflict over the choice of national languages, and poor-quality education provision, including within the field of higher education.

The final part of this chapter adopts the concept of the *eduscape,* drawing on Arun Appadurai's theorizing of '-scapes' as a way of making sense of contemporary global flows of people, money, technology, information and ideas (Appadurai, 1990). The term eduscape describes the global flows of ideas around education policy, pedagogy, curricula, and texts, allowing an exploration of "a global homogenous system that is still embedded in local particularities" (A. Gunter & Raghuram, 2016, p.123). Section 3.5 below elucidates the Timorese eduscape, incorporating the implications of five centuries of often brutal colonial occupation and Timor-Leste's current position at the periphery of global affairs.

3.2 Colonization under Portugal

Portugal's first contact with the island of Timor can be traced to the early 16th century, when explorers and Dominican missionaries first attempted to gain a foothold in the region. European interest in the region increased with the growth of the spice trade and in 1642 a Portuguese trading post was established in the western enclave of Oecussi, predominantly dealing in sandalwood and slaves (Braithwaite et al., 2012a).

In 1749 Timor was divided into Dutch Timor in the west and Portuguese Timor in the east. Portuguese Timor was a distant colonial outpost, with authorities in Lisbon showing little interest in the outpost and the Timorese left mostly to govern themselves at the local level (Butcher et al., 2015). The island was divided into a patchwork of small, ethnolinguistically diverse tribal kingdoms ruled by *Liurai* (local 'chiefs' in Tetum), village leaders often spoke the languages of neighbouring villages and the various groups lived under a "stable indigenous multilingualism" (Hajek, 2000, p.401). There was little Portuguese involvement in local governance and the colonial period until 1975 can be broadly characterised as rule by neglect, due to the considerable distance and isolation from the rest of the Portuguese empire (Wise, 2006).

In the early 20th century Portugal attempted to raise more income from its colonies and began to commercialise Timorese agriculture, using forced labour and introducing a local administration system to limit the power of the local leaders. This was met with considerable local resistance and in 1912 Dom Boaventura, a *Liurai* from Manufahi in the central-south, led a rebellion in response to the imposition of new controls and taxes from Lisbon, resulting in the deaths of as many as 25,000 Timorese (Braithwaite et al., 2012a). Portuguese rule was abruptly interrupted by the Japanese imperial army's invasion of Portuguese Timor in 1942, as its forces swept through South-East Asia. A small force of Australian commandos staged a rear-guard action with support from the Portuguese administrators (despite Portugal declaring itself neutral during this conflict) and indigenous local support, which resulted in the deaths of between 40,000-60,000 Timorese, and the loss of 40 Australian soldiers (Braithwaite et al., 2012a). At the end of the war Portugal resumed control and committed in principle to decolonisation when it joined the United Nations in 1955, but became entangled in protracted conflicts with independence movements in its African colonies, notably Angola and Mozambique (Butcher et al., 2015).

Various groups within the country continued to opposed Portuguese colonial rule, often ending in violent confrontations with *Liurai*-led resistance groups (CAVR, 2013). The Viqueque Rebellion in 1959 involved a group of Indonesians who had been exiled from West Timor, and resulted in the deaths of several hundred conspirators (J.

Gunter, 2007). This event was also the catalyst for a limited increase in investment in local schools by the administration (Jones, 2003) and was later used by pro-Indonesian parties after the Portuguese withdrawal and subsequent Indonesian invasion, as a historical example of Indonesian and Timorese solidarity (J. Gunter, 2007).

Communications with the outside world into the 20th century had remained extremely limited, even as Portugal had begun to realise the importance of telecommunications for maintaining a sprawling empire. By 1931 the North Australia submarine telegraph cable had offered some added connection with the outside world, in addition to a single wireless station allowing a connection with the world via a receiver in the Dutch Indies (Silva, 2001). By 1947 the Portuguese authorities had been providing just two hours of radio content to their colonies in Goa (now part of India) and Macau (China), but none to Portuguese Timor (Ribeiro, 2014).

Throughout the Portuguese colonial period education was restricted to a small, privileged proportion of the population, administered by the Catholic church and delivered in Portuguese. An emerging minority class of *Letrados* ('literate' or 'learned' in Portuguese) Timorese with higher levels of education, some of whom were sent to be educated in Portugal, was responsible for the administration of the colony (Jones, 2003; Millo & Barnett, 2004). The *Letrados* included members of *Liurai* families, often educated in local missionary schools in an effort to appease local leaders. They organised the extraction and export of coffee, sugar cane and sandalwood. In spite of modest gains, the vast majority of the population had no access to formal education, and by 1975 it is estimated that less than 10% of the population could read and write in any language (Timor-Leste Ministry of Education, 2015). The Archbishop of Timor-Leste and 1996 joint Nobel Peace Prize-winner Archbishop Belo remarked that "[a]fter 400 years of the Portuguese presence in Timor, the number of primary schools could be counted on the fingers" (Belo, 2020, preface).

3.3 THE INDONESIAN OCCUPATION

With the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974 and the transition to a liberal democracy, the new leadership in Lisbon committed to the decolonisation of its remaining overseas territories. The Portuguese administration withdrew from Timor-Leste in August 1975, leaving a political vacuum, and after months of civil unrest the nascent left wing political party FRETILIN (‘*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*’, ‘Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste’ in Portuguese) seized power from the right wing UDT (‘*União Democrática Timorense’*, or ‘Timorese Democratic Union’ in Tetum) on the 28th of November. Shortly thereafter a group of Indonesian ‘volunteers’ organised by the Indonesian army invaded Timor-Leste from Indonesian West Timor on the 7th of December 1975, commencing a brutal and destructive 25-year occupation of the country. The invasion was tacitly agreed to by allies of Indonesia’s president Suharto, including the United States and Australia, as an action necessary to prevent the spread of communism through South-East Asia (Braithwaite et al., 2012a). FRETILIN members mounted a resistance with the limited arms and soldiers available, but were soon pushed back to strongholds in the mountainous interior. The small Chinese community that had established itself, mostly as merchants in Dili, was targeted with accusations of communist sympathies, and over 700 Chinese-Timorese were killed in 1975 alone (Barreto Soares, 2019), although ironically many of the victims had come to Timor-Leste to escape communist China.

Indonesia proceeded to govern Timor-Leste as its 27th province, known as *Timor-Timur*. Speaking Portuguese was banned and Bahasa Indonesia was mandated for use in all areas of public life, including education. The occupied country was effectively cut off from the outside world, as the Indonesian military quickly took over key communications sites such as the Marconi centre radio tower in central Dili (D. T. Hill, 2002). Local communities were forcibly resettled in villages to better control the populations and at least 20,000 Indonesian soldiers were stationed in Timor-Leste at all times during the occupation (Butcher et al., 2015). Resistance took the form of guerrilla fighting and clandestine networks of civilians were established across the country. As part of an Indonesian policy of *Transmigrasi* (‘transmigration’ in

Indonesian), civil servants and workers from other Indonesian islands were transferred to Dili and regional centres. The Indonesian government, led by the military, assumed control of natural resources including coffee, sandalwood and timber, and looked to extract as much profit from the province as possible (CAVR, 2013).

Transmigrasi included the majority of school teachers, brought from Indonesia to both rapidly expand the education system and use it as an instrument of state control. As with all Indonesian provinces, the national philosophy of *Pancasila* ('five principles' in Indonesian) which embraced Indonesian nationalism as the core governing principle. According to Timorese independence activist Alberto Arenas:

> Through the imposition of the Indonesian language, the national Pancasila ideology, the respect for typical Indonesian symbols of patriotism such as the flag and the national anthem, and the dissemination of a new version of history, Indonesia sought to ensure that young Timorese could eventually come to view themselves as full-fledged Indonesian citizens (Arenas, 1998, p.131).

Prior to the Indonesian invasion, FRETILIN had introduced a national literacy campaign in 1974 as part of a wider socioeconomic program (CAVR, 2013), inspired by the work of Brazilian educational philosopher activist Paulo Freire, and produced a literacy manual. Entitled *Rai Timor, Rai Ita Nian* ('Timor land, our land' in Tetum), the manual was also inspired by the work of Franz Fanon and Mao Tse-Tung, and these ideas were introduced by Timorese students returning from Portugal (Urban & von Linsingen, 2018). Other collaborators had contact with students from Portugal's African colonies where similar literacy programs were enacted, including Mozambique and Guinea Bissau (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2013). According to Leach (2016a) the manual's authors believed that "anti-colonial nationalism should draw upon popular and traditional values, reframing them as the characteristics of unified modern nation or 'people', to transcend the local identities of different ethno-linguistic groups" (p.41).

The Portuguese administration had used political tensions between tribal groups to their advantage, and the *Rai Timor, Rai Ita Nia* manual stressed unity and

self-determination as key to winning the struggle for independence. Learners were encouraged to engage in critical dialogue to interrogate the conditions of their oppression and poverty experienced under Portuguese rule and the realities of life under a new oppressive regime (Leach, 2016a).

The Catholic church became an advocate and information conduit for the resistance movement, helping raise awareness of the situation outside the country and supporting clandestine operations and communication within (CAVR, 2013). As a province of majority Muslim Indonesia, Timor was given autonomy to choose a state religion and individuals were compelled to choose a religion to be listed on their identity cards. Those who did not were designated atheist – shorthand for communist – exposing them to persecution which drove even more Timorese to identify as Catholic (Arenas, 1998). In 1996 Archbishop Carlos Belo and independence campaigner Jose Ramos Horta were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to bring the plight of the Timorese people to international attention.

UNTIM (*Universitas Timor Timur*, 'University of East Timor' in Indonesian) was established in 1986, teaching agriculture, English, social and political sciences and pedagogy, and by the mid-1990s over 2,500 students were enrolled. The teaching was reported as being poor quality, and thousands of young Timorese chose to travel to Indonesia to study (Jones, 2003). Many of these students came together to form part of a student resistance movement, RENETIL (*Resistencia Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste* in Portuguese, 'Timor-Leste Students' National Resistance'), a nonviolent clandestine student organisation formed in Bali in 1988, and many were active in wider Indonesian human rights and pro-democracy movements dating back to the 1980s (CAVR, 2013). RENETIL organised events such as Christmas parties and soccer competitions through Indonesian government-sponsored student associations, which they infiltrated to organise protests and communicate with FRETILIN (Braithwaite et al., 2012b).

The advent of the worldwide web in the 1990s allowed international Timor-Leste independence activists to coordinate activities more effectively and apply political pressure on the Indonesian government. This was part of an ongoing 'battle

for information' about the situation within the country to share with the outside world (D. T. Hill, 2002). Participants in this research project who had been students in the 1990s described how internet access was strictly controlled until the independence referendum, another way in which Timorese people were cut off from the outside world by the Indonesian authorities.

Investment in schools and other local infrastructure became propaganda for the Suharto government to show an investment in Timorese development (Magalhães, 2015) and the Indonesian government could claim that by 1990, national literacy levels in *Timor Timur* had reached 30%. However, there was a stark contrast in educational attainment, with 1995 statistics showing that in households where the head was born in Timor, less than 50% had completed primary education, compared to 95% of household members with a non-Timorese head of family, partly due to a reluctance from Timorese families to expose their children to the Indonesian education system (Jones, 2003). There was little investment in local teacher training, and by 1999 fewer than 12% of all teachers and fewer than 2% of those teaching high school were Timorese (ibid).

The end of the millennium was a period of flux in Indonesian political history. The end of the 31-year regime of General Suharto in Indonesia in May 1998 saw vice-president Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie assume the presidency. A common view in Indonesia was that *Timor Timur* and its resistance movement had become a constant irritation, to paraphrase foreign minister Ali Alatas, a "pebble in Indonesia's shoe" (Singh, 1999, p.497). Talks on Timor-Leste's future between the United Nations, Australia, Portugal, Timorese exiles including José Ramos Horta, and Indonesia, had made little progress until Habibie made the sudden unilateral decision to offer the Timorese people an independence referendum, taking all parties by surprise (Greenless & Garran, 2002). The parties agreed to hold a ballot on the 8 August and in June 1999 the United Nations established a Mission in East Timor (UNAMET). In March the Indonesian military began covert operations with pro-Indonesian militias operating in Timor-Leste with the aim of subverting the referendum through violence and intimidation. Despite this coercion, 78.5% of the adult population voted to reject

the offer of 'special autonomy' within Indonesia, and become an independent nation. (Robinson, 2003).

The fallout from the referendum announcement was swift and catastrophic. The withdrawal of Indonesian forces following the independence referendum in 1999 was marked by a 'scorched earth' directive, and between 1200-1500 people were killed in the withdrawal, with half a million forced from their homes, and 250,000 Timorese citizens were moved into camps across the border in Indonesian West Timor, together with many of the militia members who continued to terrorise Timorese refugees (CAVR, 2013). Infrastructure within *Timor Timur*, including schools, the university and almost the entire electricity and telecommunications system was destroyed (Infodev, 2013).

The CAVR (*Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste*, 'Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation' in Portuguese) released its final report in 2005, which estimated that from 1975-1998, there were more than 100,000 conflict-related deaths in Timor-Leste, most due to hunger and sickness in the first five years of the occupation alone (CAVR, 2013). More than half of the population experienced at least one displacement event, and the commission recorded testimonies of widespread, systematic human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, torture, as well as other forms of ill-treatment and threats, most of which were attributed to the Indonesian military and its auxiliaries (CAVR, 2013).

3.4 Transition and independence

In the aftermath of the Indonesian withdrawal the United Nations established a Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) and took over governance of the country while the first independent elections were held. The reconstruction focussed on rebuilding education infrastructure ahead of curriculum development (R. Shah, 2012). UNTAET approached the post-conflict, post-colonial Timor-Leste as a 'blank slate', and but this was far from an accurate description of the socio-political environment they operated within. It was, rather, "a highly contested site of social and political conflict fuelled by competition for power and resources including the

distribution of aid and employment opportunities, and property disputes" (Niner et al., 2021, p.7). Niner and colleagues explain that this early competition for power was dominated by resistance groups, student organisations and educated diaspora associations, each advancing a competing agenda for change.

The first parliamentary elections were held in 2002 and FRETILIN, headed by the resistance leader Xanana Gusmão, won a large majority of seats. One area of considerable debate concerned the choice of a national language. The national constitution introduced in 2002 adopted Tetum (the most widely spoken indigenous language) and Portuguese as co-official languages, and the myriad endogenous languages spoken across the country were designated 'national' languages, while English and Indonesian became 'working' languages (Constituent Assembly, 2002).

The decision to assign Portuguese official language status was contentious given that many of the *Geraçao Foun* ('New Generation' in Portuguese and Tetum) who had grown up under the Indonesian occupation had no knowledge of Portuguese as it was banned from use, and only an estimated 5-20% of the population spoke Portuguese at that time (Hajek, 2000). Older leaders from *Geraçao '75* ('Generation '75' in Portuguese) supported the adoption of Portuguese as it had been the language of the resistance. Many of the FRETILIN leadership who fled the Indonesian occupation had moved to Lusophone countries such as Angola, Mozambique and Portugal, and the decision to adopt Portuguese ultimately advanced their claim to power. In 2002 Timor-Leste joined the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), reflecting the move to strengthen ties with the Lusophone world, and in 2014 Timor-Leste assumed chairmanship of the organization for four years ("Timor-Leste Prepares to Lead Portuguese-Speaking Group", 2014). It is interesting to note the etymology of the generational nomenclature for Timorese in the post-Portuguese era. *Geraçao '75* is a Portuguese term, whereas *Geraçao Foun* is part Portuguese, part Tetum. The term generally used to describe the post-independence generation, *Gerasaun Independencia* ('independence generation') is an entirely Tetum term signalling the common usage of this language in contemporary Timorese society.

The language ecosystem in Timor-Leste is dynamic and complex (Taylor-Leech, 2009) with approximately 20 endogenous languages including Tetum, Makassae and Fataluku, and exogenous languages with colonial connections– Indonesian and Portuguese. These are used with varying frequency across the country, with Indonesian being more commonly used in the West, where Indonesian influence was stronger during the occupation, while Portuguese is more widely spoken in the east (Taylor-Leech, 2009). The choice of Portuguese as a co-official language led to accusations of the introduction of an "assimilationist exclusionary monolingual Portuguese model" (da Silva Sarmento, 2013) championed by members of *Geraçao '75* who successfully assumed power in the early years of independence. The insistence on using a language not spoken by a majority of Timorese had important implications throughout society, including the court system and the national parliament, where members of parliament do not always have the literacies in Portuguese to be able to contribute to parliamentary debate ("Portuguese Language Major Obstacle", 2017).

Timorese people, particularly those in Dili, are regularly exposed to multiple languages, in what some scholars (Barnard et al., 2011; da Silva Sarmento, 2013) have called a plurilingual mix characterised by individuals using a mix of languages which they may not be entirely proficient in to communicate between different ethnic groups. A 2011 study of an English language classroom environment at UNTL revealed frequent examples of code switching between Tetum, Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia and English (Barnard et al., 2011), with the same teaching practices noted in a recent paper on multilingualism in a petroleum studies university class (Newman, 2022). This is unsurprising given that university textbooks are generally written in the latter three languages.

UNTIM was reopened as UNTL after international ODA was provided to help repair and refurnish lecture theatres in 2000. This early transition period left students' studies suspended, and caused disruption to the education of the *Geraçao Foun* affected by the violent transition and destruction of educational infrastructure. Interviews with Timorese who had been studying in Indonesia at this time suggest that

university administrators often allowed these students to complete their studies without disruption before they returned to their homeland.

Most Indonesian teachers had departed soon after the referendum, and during the early days of independence, the lack of trained teachers had a major impact on the quality of teaching and learning. According to Millo & Barnett (2004):

> Secondary schoolteachers, the majority being university students who had not completed their bachelor degrees in Indonesia due to the violence of 1999, have complained of their lack of knowledge about pedagogy, maintaining discipline, and the transfer of knowledge. Teachers have opted instead to use forceful disciplinary measures to try to keep children in class (p.731).

These teachers were effectively teaching the way they had been taught, recreating the classroom environment which constrained their own educations, and without the basic training to break this cycle. Colonization by Portugal and Indonesia left a lasting, deep-seated impression on the education system after independence. H. Hill (2007) noted the persistence of a 'hidden curriculum'; a reproduction of colonial-era, teacher-centred, didactic teaching practices and the use of methods such as rote learning and memorization of information which constrain the education system to this day. Research by M. Quinn (2013) highlighted the predominance of 'teacher talking time' (TTT) in Timorese classrooms, while R. Shah and Lopes Cardozo (2016) detail the passive, didactic learning experience for many Timorese schoolchildren, which is supported by Vasco's reflection on the lack of critical thinking skills in the Portrait of a Cohort in Chapter 1 Section 5.

The Portuguese government, working together with the government of Brazil, provided Portuguese language and pedagogic training to local teachers between 2003 and 2009, however a number of conditions constrained the effectiveness of these efforts. For example, the internecine conflict in 2006 and 2007 postponed much of the planned teacher retraining. In 2009 the primary and secondary school system shut down for a semester to provide intensive retraining, however due to the impact of the global financial crisis, the funding was not made available to provide the original level of support. According to one account "[v]ery few of the Portuguese and Brazilian

educators had had any special preparation to work in the Timorese context and some had no background in teacher training" (Carneiro, 2021, p.61). To many, reimposing Portuguese as the primary medium of instruction represents a form of linguistic neocolonialism (da Silva Sarmento, 2017) promoting Portuguese language and culture as 'Lusitanization' (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2021).

In 2011 the Government of Timor-Leste released an ambitious strategic plan with a vision for education and training that:

> all Timorese children should attend school and receive a quality education that gives them the knowledge and skills to lead healthy, productive lives and to actively contribute to our nation's development (República Democrática de Timor-Leste, 2011, p.14).

Research in 2015 found that over 40% of the population over 15 had no formal education (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The number of graduate teachers entering the education system has fallen behind student enrolment growth and schools are often overcrowded, with limited access to learning resources such as textbooks (M. Quinn & Buchanan, 2021). During the latter stage of fieldwork for this project, one educational stakeholder participant related the story of some school administrators preserving books in the plastic wrapping they arrived in without allowing students to read them. One significant change in education policy was the introduction of mother tongues as the medium of instruction in early years education, recognising Timor-Leste's linguistic diversity and the importance of endogenous languages beyond Tetum to local communities (Caffery et al., 2016).

Architects of the 2011 strategic plan were criticised for failing to consult widely and do the necessary research in order to set specific strategic goals, nor did they provide a budget for how the various goals would be funded (Fundasaun Mahein, 2021). The Asian Development Bank, in a Timor-Leste partner strategy document, identified the core problem facing the country as "[the] limited relevance of Timorese education and vocational training systems in preparing young people with professional and practical skills for labour market needs" (Asian Development Bank, 2015, p.5). The plan committed to an increase in funding for adult literacy and lifelong

learning, but in reality, local non-formal training centres, most notably those established by the group Science of Life Systems (SOLS), appear to have had the most impact. SOLS was established first in Cambodia before opening in Timor in 2005 and established approximately 30 centres around the country, including the enclave of Oecussi, teaching English, leadership and computing skills, and most of the younger generation who speak English have undertaken training with this organisation (Rose, 2019). Clearly the post-independence transition has had its challenges, and these issues continue to confront contemporary Timorese society.

ONGOING SOCIOECONOMIC CHALLENGES

During the first years of transition to independence, Timor-Leste's economy was heavily dependent on overseas development assistance ODA and UN funding, as UNTAET oversaw the reconstruction effort to restore basic infrastructure to the country. The renegotiation of the Timor Gap treaty with Australia saw a large reserve of oil and gas fall within Timorese territorial waters. Production commenced in 2004, and thereafter Timor-Leste became among the most oil dependent countries on earth, with over a third of its gross domestic product derived from this sector in 2017 (John et al., 2020). The contemporary Timorese economy has been characterised by some observers as a 'rentier state' (Barma, 2021; John et al., 2020; Neves, 2014) with a heavy reliance on income from oil and gas royalties, dependence on the importation of foreign goods currently estimated at over 500 million US dollars per annum (Scheiner, 2021) and a disproportionately large public service employing a significant share of the local workforce. In recent years resource revenues have declined and by some estimates the known oil and gas reserves will run dry within the next few years (de Cruz Cardoso, 2019; Scheiner, 2021).

In an effort to kickstart economic development, the government has embarked on a series of expensive 'megaprojects', including an oil and gas refinery on the South coast and a special economic zone in the enclave of Oecussi, with major social and cultural impacts for those living in these areas (Bovensiepen & Meitzner Yoder, 2018). At the same time Timor-Leste continues to face fundamental issues such as food

security, with large areas of the country suffering from seasonal food shortages. According to the UN, around 50% of all children in Timor-Leste under 5 years old suffer from malnutrition and stunting (FAO et al., 2021), which has a significant impact on educational outcomes.

Other key post-independence era issues include the tensions within Timorese society which ignited in 2006 and 2007 as violent conflict broke out between groups within the army – recruited mostly from the east of the country – and the police force recruited from the west, revealing fissures dating back to the Indonesian occupation and before (Scambary, 2009). A number of powerful martial arts gangs, with origins in Indonesia, became popular with disenfranchised Timorese youth and were connected to the violence in 2006; the largest has over 35,000 members (Pawelz, 2015).

With unemployment a major issue facing the country, many young Timorese people are attracted to opportunities to travel and work abroad as a source of mobility, both spatial and social. Some established migration routes include a community, mostly from the far east of the country, who now live and work in the UK, having qualified for Portuguese passports and travelled to Oxford, Manchester, Belfast and other areas to work as factory labour, although the exit of Britain from the European Union now means that these workers face an uncertain future (McWilliam, 2012). Other more formal international labour agreements such as the Australian Government's Seasonal Worker's Program (SWP) allows hundreds of Timorese along with workers from Pacific Island nations to work in hospitality and agriculture. The Korean government's Employment Permit System (EPS) allows Timorese to work in the agriculture, fisheries and manufacturing industries, and these programs allowed workers to remit $65 million USD back to families in Timor-Leste in 2016 (Wigglesworth, 2017).

A RETURN TO CUSTOMARY PRACTICES

In the post-independence era Timor-Leste has undergone a revival in traditional customary practices, although it should be noted that Timorese society under Indonesian occupation maintained a complex network of family and kinship groups,

which helped maintain social order, despite a ban on these practices imposed by the occupiers (Brown, 2012). Individual aspirations for a 'good life' are not limited to wealth accumulation and a good job; there is an expectation that family members based in Dili return home to their village and participate in ceremonies as well as sending money for the upkeep of *uma lulik* ('spirit houses' in Tetum), connecting people to land (Trindade & Barnes, 2013). Many Timorese people, particularly those working or studying in Dili, inhabit a customary modernity described in Chapter 2, navigating tensions between adherence to local custom and familial obligations, contrasted with a more individualist focus on achievement for personal goals (McWilliam, 2020a). An example of this is Simao from Chapter 1, looking to study at an Indonesian online university while funding the funeral ceremonies for family members. Myat Thu (2019) notes that tens of thousands of Timorese still inhabit settlements they were forcibly relocated to under the Indonesian regime, and this has an ongoing impact on issues of land ownership and local economic development.

Traditional marriage practices, known as *Barlarke* in Tetum, were sustained through the Indonesian occupation and remain important to Timorese culture and identity, particularly in rural areas (Niner, 2012). The population living in Dili generally more Catholic while those in rural areas practice ancestor worship through maintenance of *uma lulik* and customary observances such as the exchange of traditional gifts (da Silva, 2013), evidenced by Simao's obligation to pay for a buffalo for his uncle's funeral ceremony. This is part of a revival of traditional death ceremonies across the country, including reburials of victims of conflict during the Indonesian occupation (Bovensiepen, 2014).

Emerging telecommunications infrastructure

Telecommunications infrastructure in the post-independence era has incrementally improved. Internet access in Timor-Leste had until 2011 been severely restricted due to prohibitive cost. A 2011 UN survey of communication and media found that radio remained the most popular source of information, but that internet access had doubled since 2006. Mobile phone ownership was six times the 2006 number, and

there was significant variation between districts, with most growth occurring in and around Dili (UNMIT, 2011). A 2009 report on telecommunications infrastructure in Timor-Leste noted that under the monopoly control of Timor Telecom (a company part-owned by Portugal Telecom), "[c]ustomers have been complaining about its pricing regime and the low quality of service" (Pires da Silva, 2009, p.351).

The liberalization of the telecommunications industry in 2012 brought two competitors to the market; the Indonesian provider *Telkomcel*, and *Telemor*, a local subsidiary of the Vietnamese telco *Viatel*. The introduction of competition immediately drove the price of data down, and during the first period of fieldwork for this project in Dili in mid-2015, an 'unlimited' if slow connection could be prepaid for $1 USD per day. At the same time relatively more affordable mobile internet-connected devices became available, particularly in the various markets around Dili, where an internet-accessible phone can be purchased for under 90 USD as well as in market stalls around the capital and larger towns. Wi-Fi hotspots were established in public areas around Dili including at *Largo Lecidere* on the waterfront and the *Parque 5 Maio* in the centre of the city.

Figure 2

One of the Many Advertising Boards Promoting Mobile Internet Data Packages around Dili, 2017 (Author's photo).

The telecommunications system is now under considerable strain due to growing demand, with approximately a quarter of the population in 2017 connected to the internet and considerable scope for expansion. A major limitation to further expansion is the reliance of the system on satellite internet connectivity (Infodev, 2013), and internet connection speeds are up to 25 times slower than in other countries in the Asia-Pacific. Timor-Leste is one of the few remaining countries on earth without a fibre-optic cable connection with the outside world (Inder, 2018). in late 2020 the Government of Timor-Leste announced it planned to establish a fibre-optic link with Australia in cooperation with the Australian government (Freitas, 2020).

ONGOING STRUCTURAL ISSUES IN LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

The continuing debate over national languages has negatively impacted attempts to reform and improve the Timorese education system. Indonesian remains an important working language and English has become popular, particularly for those looking to work for United Nations agencies or INGOs in the well-paid local development sector, or study abroad on an international scholarship. According to a 2015 survey, 62.5% of the Timorese population speak, read and write Tetum, 30.8% Portuguese, 36.6% Indonesian and 15.6% English (General Directorate of Statistics et al., 2017). Taylor-Leech (2009, p.21) stresses the major impact of the colonial legacy on language literacies:

> The parlous state of literacy in Timor-Leste reflects the fact that it has long been the instrument of colonialism. The consequences of Portuguese and Indonesian literacy planning and practices have shaped both the culture of Timor-Leste and the course of its history. Literacy has been seen as cultural missionary work (bringing the light of the gospel to the unenlightened and uncivilised natives), as a means of social exclusion and as a means of control. In 'Portuguese times' literacy was a mechanism for bringing about the compliance of the indigenous leaders by incorporating them into the colonial enterprise and by excluding the vast majority of the population from the colonial elite. Under the Indonesians,

> literacy was a mechanism for the social and ideological control of the masses. Contemporary literacy rates in Timor-Leste and their distribution reflect both deep social inequality and alienation from an education system that has never reflected the needs and cultural realities of most of the population.

Through each phase of Timor's history, language has been used as an instrument of power, concentrating it amongst a literate elite and marginalizing the rest of the population.

With the opening of Timor-Leste to the wider world, the popularity of the English language has grown as the *lingua franca* of globalization (Caffery et al., 2016). Quinto (2012) applies Kachru's four functions of language to categorise the uses of English in Timor-Leste, noting its *interpersonal* function as a 'link language' shared by speakers of multiple languages, its *instrumental* function as "the language of power, job opportunities, prestige and status" (Quinto, 2012, p.69) and its *regulative* function as a working language of important regional organisations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which Timor-Leste seeks to join. The final *innovative or imaginative* function denotes the ways in which Timorese use English creatively in communication, for example on social media, often admixed with other languages.

Despite the rapid expansion in higher education enrolments throughout southeast Asia (Rizvi, 2017) and calls for greater investment, education in Timor-Leste at all levels remains underfunded. Government spending on education has decreased since 2014 and is low by global comparison (Sexton & da Costa, 2018). An October 2021 blog post by local civil society organisation *Fundasaun Mahein* characterised the issues facing education in Timor-Leste as:

> a series of interlinking, structural problems, including teacher training, language and curriculum issues, lack of materials and facilities and maternal and child malnutrition. As a result of the failure to invest properly in public education since independence, much of an entire generation of Timorese youth has passed through the school system without achieving basic literacy or numeracy skills. Timor-Leste's "poor human resources" are commonly cited as a major

> barrier to development, as poorly educated people are less productive and cannot participate in new economic sectors or work to strengthen state institutions. Education is also a security issue, as youth who are left behind by the education system become a burden rather than benefit to national development. Constantly growing youth unemployment, inactivity and violence are testament to these realities. (Fundasaun Mahein, 2021, n.p)

The prevalence of a 'banking' pedagogical approach reproduced by many Timorese teachers using rote learning and repetition, highlights the deeply embedded issues impeding the development of a quality education system, even after two decades of independence. Secondary education is generally considered to be better in Dili, and there is a regular migration of young people from the outlying municipalities into the capital to live with relatives and study to have an improved chance of entering higher education (UNDP, 2018).

Tom, an Australian undergraduate student studying at UNTL who was interviewed for this project, had this to say about his educational experience:

> The classrooms were very under resourced, you'd be lucky to have electricity running into the rooms, they were hot, relatively uncomfortable. In terms of the kind of environment that's created by the teacher and the student dynamic I would say two of the classes were, I guess what you could say modern-style, like student centred learning… One of them was very old school– kind of probably the kind of style that I would imagine that the Portuguese would have run, very pre-1975, very much teacher-oriented. [He] spent a lot of time in his office and didn't really seem like he had the time of day and [would] probably rock up to about half of his classes - so you know one of his students would get a text message halfway through what was meant to be the seminar, and just 'sorry, you know, just come next week instead' and then he would be really unlikely to even come then.

The higher education system in Timor-Leste remains almost entirely located in Dili, with UNTL as the sole public university. UNESCO has noted that the Timorese higher education system "suffers from problems of access, quality and relevance" (UNESCO, 2014c p. 14). Education is a key influence on social mobility in Timor-Leste as elsewhere, however quality issues mean that many of those who make it to

university graduate lack the skills and literacies to compete for the limited places in the job market (Inder et al., 2019). There is intense competition for government posts and well-paid jobs with UN agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and other international organisations including PLAN International and Oxfam (H. Hill, 2018). An ILO report estimated tertiary graduate unemployment at 57%, and noted that levels of unemployment actually increase as education levels increase. The report explained that graduates:

> tend to have high reservation wage (i.e. the minimum amount that the jobseeker would accept employment) and therefore prefer to wait and continue seeking employment with higher pay rather than to accept any job at a lower pay (ILO, 2019 p.18).

The UN remains an important strategic partner in the development of Timor-Leste's education system. Its 'Sustainable Cooperation Framework: Timor-Leste 2021-2025' is designed to help accelerate progress towards the SDGs, including SDG 4 – quality education, and includes a goal that by 2025:

> All the people of Timor-Leste, particularly excluded and disadvantaged groups, have increased access to quality formal and innovative learning pathways (from early childhood though lifelong learning) and acquire foundational, transferable, digital and job-specific skills. (United Nations Timor-Leste, 2020).

It remains unclear how ambitious goals such this will be achieved without further government investment or an increase in ODA for education. Donor countries Australia, the United States, and New Zealand contribute to local higher education infrastructure through support for the English Language Centre, the *Uma America* and the Xanana Reading Room respectively, providing educational resources in English and access to an often-intermittent internet connection. The Catholic church remains an important institution within the Timorese education system, and many international scholarship recipients interviewed for this project were alumni of both Catholic secondary schools and overseas seminary study programs. In late 2021 the Catholic church announced plans to launch its own university, upgrading the status of an

existing religious training college. In preparation, 50 lecturers have been employed and Portuguese has been chosen as the language of instruction (Dagur, 2021).

For Timorese students from families with the means to fund overseas study, higher education options in the region are one means of gaining a better-quality university qualification. Indonesia remains a popular choice for individuals with the family financial means to support them, and there were 3,500 students enrolled in Indonesian universities in 2009 (Bexley, 2009) rising to 4,450 in 2017 (da Costa et al., 2017). There are also over 200 Timorese students studying in the Philippines, either funded privately by their families or sponsored by the Catholic church (de Sousa, 2021a).

International scholarships are a coveted source of mobility, and there is stiff competition for places on programs to countries including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and increasingly China. In the early years of independence, the Cuban government initiated a medicine scholarship program and by 2005 over 1000 places had been filled. These graduates now practicing medicine in Timor-Leste represent "the backbone of the country's primary health care and medical training, dwarfing all other health aid programmes in the country and in the region" (UNDP, 2018, p.105). In 2021 the Australia Awards scholarships received 368 applications, the highest ever, representing a 38% increase on the previous year, with 20 places available. The US Timor-Leste (USTL) Scholarships experience a similar demand, with the program accepting over 200 applications for just 3 places (USTL, 2019). The Chinese government has significantly increased its investment in scholarships to bring Timorese students to China, and offered 54 places in Chinese universities in 2019 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 2020), more than the number of scholarship places offered by Australia, New Zealand and the US combined. Other countries in the region offer scholarships, although these are generally reserved for public servants. A recent study of Timorese scholarship recipients also revealed clear "patterns of privilege" connected to socio-economic status among successful applicants, further entrenching inequalities (Simões, 2020, p.i). Interestingly, Simões was an international scholarship recipient studying a postgraduate degree in the UK. The emergence of a middle class capable of taking

advantage of these scholarship opportunities shows these patterns also repeated among nearby Melanesian nations (Barbara et al., 2015). The influence of international scholarship programs on individual practices is explored further in Chapter 9.

Recent events both local and international have caused major disruption to Timorese society, notably political instability, the COVID outbreak and widespread damage caused by Tropical Cyclone Serja at Easter 2020, which killed 44 people, affected approximately 34,000 households and resulted in around $300 million USD in economic losses (Scheiner, 2021). Three different government coalitions have formed since 2017, and frequent delays in approving the national budget have withheld much-needed funds from the education system. The most recent government has drafted a recovery agenda which remains reliant on funding from oil and gas revenues.

The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns have forced education institutions to attempt online class provision. The *Eskola ba Uma* ('school at home' in Tetum) program was released in collaboration with UNICEF in response to the pandemic, aiming to reach 350,000 students across the country (Martins, 2021), however it is not known how many students have actually been able to access these resources (de Sousa, 2021b). The significant infrastructure limitations restricting access to a reliable internet connection, power supply and an internet-connected device, particularly outside Dili, have limited this program's effectiveness. UNTL and other higher education institutions attempted to move to online provision, with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Culture (MHESC) offering free internet access to 65,000 students. Many students protested that they had been disadvantaged by not having access to personal ICTs to use this connection during lockdowns. Recent rushed attempts by education institutions to transition online have been met with resistance and student protests (Fernandes, 2021).

Figure 3

A Student Protesting the Introduction of Online Classes at UNTL in Response to Covid-19 Lockdowns, Dili, 2021. The sign says *Aula virtual la iha efikasia*- [‘Online learning does not have efficacy’ in Tetum.]

(Image source: Fernandes, 2021. Reproduced with permission).

A proposed COVID-19 National Recovery Plan released in August 2020 proposes a 2% annual increase in government funding for education until the current figure is doubled, with an increase in funding to both public and privately funded universities conditional upon improving graduate outcomes, which remain a major obstacle.

> Unfortunately, many courses provided are not of adequate quality, particularly in private universities, giving [the] impression, that they are ‘concealing’ what would be a large group of unemployed or underemployed young people. Moreover… many of those who graduated from these universities end up not finding a job in the labour market or finding it in completely different areas (República Democrática de Timor-Leste, 2020).

There is growing evidence of open online learning being introduced in Timor-Leste, including OER on basic principles of human rights created in English and Tetum for UNTL by the Global Campus of Human Rights. These resources have often been produced in response to the pandemic to allow some continuity in education during this disruption. Another earlier example was the *Matenek* teacher training program, which provided 'job embedded' teacher professional development training (TPD) to Timorese primary teachers, with the aim of improving their knowledge of both content and pedagogy (Catalpa International Ltd., 2019). These two examples are explored further in Chapter 10.

Post-colonial, post-conflict Timor-Leste has had high ambitions for rapid development, has arguably been overly ambitious (McWilliam & Leach, 2019), and faces further challenges in a post-Covid world. With oil and gas reserves depleting, efforts to diversify the economy will need to be scaled up if the country is to avoid greater dependence on ODA. While industries such as coffee show some promise (Inder & Qu, 2019), a well-educated workforce would positively impact the country's future socio-economic development (H. Hill, 2018; Inder et al., 2019).

The colonial legacy remains indelibly imprinted upon the features of Timor-Leste society. From the crumbling Portuguese-era architecture to the hidden curriculum with echoes of Indonesian *Pancasila* in the school system, visible and less visible areas of Timorese life are imbued with an often-violent past– the legacy of oppression and resistance. The people of Timor-Leste have shown a remarkable resilience across their history (McWilliam & Leach, 2019), retaining a national identity in the face of multiple colonisers. May 2022 marked the 20th anniversary of Timor-Leste independence, and the first two decades of development as a postcolonial, post-conflict, liberal democracy have been challenging. While progress has been made to develop the infrastructure necessary to promote prosperity, significant challenges remain, including within the education sector.

3.5 THE CONTEMPORARY TIMORESE EDUSCAPE.

Timor-Leste's education sector and the individuals and institutions within it exist within an interconnected global education system which some scholars have described as *eduscapes*. The term extends the conceptual work of Appadurai (1990), defining and describing transnational 'flows' of people (ethnoscapes), technology (technoscapes), money (finanscapes), media (mediascapes) and ideas (ideoscapes) which impact local communities – and each other – in irregular ways through the forces of globalization.

Rizvi (2007) maintains that the global forces which shape education systems need to be considered in historical context, "linked to the imperialist origins of globalization, not in some uniform way, but in ways that are specific to local particularities" (p. 262). In this thesis the term eduscape is used to describe "a localised education system as part of broader global flows of policy ideas emanating from multiple sources" (Forsey 2020, p.423). The contrast of the homogenizing effects of global education policies and practices with local contexts, reveals stark asymmetries in power relations (Forstorp & Mellström, 2013), notably in countries of the global South (A. Gunter & Raghuram, 2016), and colonial matrices of power (Quijano, 2000). With the rapid evolution of information and communications technologies (ICTs), "the so-called global culture has by and large reproduced the colonial structures of inequalities, with the post-colonial elite playing a major role in their reproduction" (Rizvi, 2007, p. 257). This next section examines the Timorese eduscape, and draws attention to the various imbalances in the flows of education policies and practices.

Timor-Leste's education policy is strongly influenced by global forces, from its commitment to achieving UN SDGs to the receipt of ODA through various donor-sponsored education projects. Caffery et al. (2016) argue that globalization has become the latest colonizing force, led by UN agencies and international organizations such as the World Bank, who exert considerable influence across the Timorese eduscape. There is currently little cooperation between education projects, meaning there are often overlaps and gaps in provision. For example, both the US and

Australian governments have invested considerably in English language support programs within UNTL, via the *Uma Amerika* and English Language Centre (ELC) respectively. The two centres are approximately 100 metres apart and serve basically the same student group, whereas other non-English related departments receive little or no support. In 2019 the Australian government ended its funding for the East Timor English Language Program (ETELP) with UNTL, handing over financial and administrative responsibility for the English Language Centre (ELC) to UNTL. The centre manager was able to secure funding from the US State Department to continue operating, resulting in the US government supporting two very similar projects. In reality, global aid for Timorese education projects has shown little growth and local government funding remains limited, and despite proposed reforms, there remains a clear disconnect between policy aspiration and financial reality, hindering further progress.

The hidden curriculum identified by H. Hill (2007) is reproduced in the higher education system, and represents a barrier to the introduction of innovative teaching and learning practices. One of the most visible signifiers of this is the lecture room furniture within lecture theatres of UNTL (see Figure 4 below): wooden desks that limit student movement and allow only one room setup. University teachers without formal training often teach the way they were taught, reproducing old didactic methods, and student project participants often complained about the preponderance of theory over practice in their courses. Emiliana, whose story is recounted in the Portrait of a Cohort in Chapter 1, pointed out that while studying midwifery, students do not actually perform a practicum until their final year of their studies. Timorese university curricula are for the most part structured around academic textbooks produced overseas, with Portuguese, Indonesian and English the common languages. The language policy dictates that Portuguese should be the primary language of instruction, but this is not always practicable as literacy levels are variable. The textbooks used are often approaching the end of their academic lifespan, which can limit their relevance. Courses are commonly structured according to textbook content and organization.

Figure 4

A Lecture Room within UNTL, 2015 (Author's photo).

The growing popularity of English closely relates to its status as the *lingua franca* of globalization. Student demand is reflected globally where English literacy is a ticket to mobility (Forstorp & Mellström, 2018) and a majority of higher education opportunities are located in the Anglophone global North (Rizvi, 2014). The only department at UNTL that teaches predominantly in English is the English department within the Faculty of Education. While many of the students wish to become teachers upon graduation, others want to improve their English to follow other, more lucrative career paths, for example in the diplomatic corps, and to apply for international scholarships. The popular private higher education institution the Institute of Business (IOB) offers a range of courses in English, which participants report is a factor in its popularity with students.

It is important to note that the promotion of recommended practices within these educational interventions assumes they are appropriate to local context and can produce the kinds of 'top-down' dynamics all too familiar in the development industry (Cornwall, 2006). This includes the promotion of Learner-Centred Pedagogy (LCP) as a method to improve education quality (Schweisfurth, 2015). Many projects promote LCP uncritically, equating it with participatory development approaches without considering that this is ideological, and arguably "a process of Westernization disguised as effective teaching and learning" (Tabulawa, 2003, p.7). However, the FRETILIN literacy program developed in the early years of resistance to the Indonesian occupation have used a similar methodology based on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Boughton, 2010). Freire's critical pedagogy is used by higher education institutions in Dili (Urban et al., 2021) and may provide inspiration for future education projects (Burns, 2017), as discussed further in Chapter 10.

Student and youth organizations retain popularity and some power within the Timor-Leste eduscape. During fieldwork in Dili in 2017 I witnessed protests over overcrowding in lectures in UNTL after the university administration oversubscribed enrolments to meet growing demand. Later that year students staged violent demonstrations after it was announced that government officials were to be given new vehicles, while other sectors such as education remained underfunded ("East Timor Police Fire Tear Gas", 2017). More recently the protests around the sudden move to online learning during COVID-19 lockdowns were in part due to the lack of access to an internet-connected device (Fernandes, 2021). This was evidence of attempts to rapidly scale education, without fully funding increased capacity within the system – a common occurrence in the global South (Rizvi, 2018). Any attempts to reform and decolonize higher education requires root and branch reform,

> reimagining and renewing curriculum and teaching methods, as well as the ways in which HEIs are structured and governed. Above all, it demands capacity building and adequate measures in planning and quality assurance (Rizvi, 2018, p. 19)

Given the limited funding for education and previously abortive attempts at systemic change, significant barriers to higher education reform remain.

Intersections of the Timorese eduscape with other key -scapes

The various -scapes that can be mapped to a locality often intersect in points of disjuncture (Appadurai, 1990), and given the aims of this thesis it is useful to delineate the intersections of the Timorese eduscape with the local ethnoscape, the technoscape, and the ideoscape. The transnational flow of students through education provides a tremendous opportunity to create physical and social mobility, and is a major incentive for Timorese. Corbett (2007) draws a direct relationship between these two forms of mobility in provincial Canada, noting that the farther individuals travel, the greater their increase in social mobility, and something comparable occurs in Timor-Leste. Students can look to draw on family resources to fund university study in Indonesia or the Philippines, but to 'cash in' on this opportunity requires applying to scholarships as far afield as the US, the UK, and even some Scandinavian countries. This can place enormous strain on successful students, and research participants who were scholarship alumni particularly those with young families recounted experiencing homesickness. A notable exception to this is Australia, one of Timor's closest neighbours, and the largest donor of ODA, however the flow of students to Australia is limited, with 20 Australia Awards scholarship places offered in 2019 (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019), before the disruption due to Covid-19 paused the program. When comparing the demand for international scholarship opportunities with the available supply, it would be more accurate to describe these exchanges as a 'trickle' than a flow across the Timor-Leste eduscape.

The flow of students into Timor-Leste for education is even more sparse, with a handful of students coming to Timor-Leste to study in recent years, including the Australian student Tom, quoted earlier in the chapter, who was interviewed for this project. International education consultants, often visiting academics, are more numerous, brought in usually on attractive salaries to advise on various projects. The

expatriate consultants interviewed for this project were committed to helping improve Timorese higher education, but were critical of low student critical literacies and a lack of preparation for the world of work.

The intersection between the technosphere and edusphere is expanding in line with ICT use within Timorese society, evidenced by the common sight of students gathered around laptops in the Wi-Fi hotspots dotted across Dili. As elsewhere in the global South a primary issue is the digital divide between those with and without access to ICTs, and the resultant imbalances in benefits to those with the means to purchase them (W. Chen & Wellman, 2004). The students observed using hotspots shared computers, often models approaching the end of their lifespans, and some had cracked screens and other signs of age and wear.

While ICT device ownership increases and connection to the internet is steadily improving, its educational applications have been limited. Timorese society has transitioned from a situation in relatively recent memory whereby internet access was strictly controlled by an occupying military regime, to the current reality where a few centavos allow individuals access to the overwhelming quantity of information available at the click of a mouse or touch of a screen. A very small number of participants (less than 10) had prior experience of taking MOOCs, while most had used the internet to perform some kind of research, including accessing OERs. When asked about their use of the internet for educational purposes, participants often jokingly referred to consulting 'Mister Google' as has become commonplace globally. The Timorese higher education system faces familiar issues around academic integrity. Plagiarism from internet sources is rife, and students often use Google Translate to write assessments in Portuguese or English when they lack proficiency in that language. One academic interviewed for this project related the story of receiving an assignment unwittingly lifted from a website written in Spanish, not the required Portuguese.

The growth in internet use has been accompanied by an exponential increase in the popularity of social media. Facebook use accounts for around 95% of online activity in Timor-Leste (UNDP, 2018). Growing concerns around internet security have

resulted in UNICEF launching programs to inform young people about issues including sharing pornographic material and bullying online (UNICEF Timor-Leste, 2019). Consequently, some local authorities, including church leaders, view the potential of providing educational opportunities via the internet with reservations, particularly given the strong influence of the Catholic church in local moral affairs, an issue addressed in Chapter 4.

The intersection of the Timorese ideoscape and eduscape centres on the flow of knowledge through the higher education system. Universities are important sites for knowledge production, however, as elsewhere in the global South, Timor is a net consumer of knowledge, as evidenced by the dependence on higher education textbooks in exogenous languages produced outside the country. There are a limited number of academic journals, including *Revista Diálogos* ('Dialogues Magazine' in Tetum) from the Faculty of Philosophy and Human Sciences at UNTL, producing knowledge within Timor-Leste, dependent on knowledge generated by the global metropole, as elsewhere in the global South (Connell, 2017). The confluence of flows of knowledge, technology and people with the eduscape reveals the imbalances in power dynamics tilted toward the global North as the established centre of economic and epistemological power. Timor-Leste, like many other Southern countries, remains a metaphorical quiet backwater in the global eduscape.

Appadurai (1996) stresses that -scapes are perspectival and can be viewed differently by different individuals within communities. They are also shaped by historical contexts, and the three generations of Timorese people since the departure of the Portuguese view the eduscape from distinct standpoints. Many of the *Geraçao '75* who sought study opportunities in Portugal and were taught in Portuguese still identify strongly with the Lusophone world, while the *Geraçao Foun* raised through the Indonesian occupation commonly speak Bahasa Indonesia and suffered the most educational disruption, yet often identify culturally with Indonesia (Bexley, 2017). The *Gerasaun Independencia* are the first truly global-facing generation, exposed to and immersed in social media, information and educational opportunity. Whether it be students profiled in Chapter 1 like Joao using the Khan Academy to practice his maths

skills or Melati using a neighbour's Wi-Fi to go online, participants have access to knowledge denied to previous generations.

3.6 Conclusion

The past 500 years of Timorese history and its recent emergence as an independent nation at the margins of a globalized world provide important context for a country still coming to terms with its turbulent past, while facing an uncertain future. The five centuries of Portuguese colonial control were generally characterised by neglect as a remote outpost of empire left to administer itself. The isolation of a half-island on the other side of the earth and the lack of educational opportunities for almost all of the inhabitants bound Timor-Leste in a form of social stasis for centuries. With the slow disintegration of the Portuguese empire in the second half of the 20th century, a Timorese independence movement was born, only then to be crushed by the invasion of Indonesia.

Timor-Leste's forced absorption into Indonesia and the resistance to this occupation from 1975-1999 and the active efforts by Indonesia to assimilate Timorese society under the *Pancasila* national philosophy started with the education system as an instrument of oppression. The resistance to ethnic and cultural genocide, and resilience in the face of these abuses, has come to define the Timorese national character. With the sudden and destructive end of the Indonesian occupation, Timor-Leste found itself newly independent, facing the challenges of a postcolonial, post-conflict society attempting to work with the UN to build a modern liberal-democratic society from the ground up. While significant progress has been made there remain major socioeconomic challenges, with an underdeveloped education system prominent among them. Timorese youth are moving through the system and graduating without the basic literacies they need to contribute to the economy, and teachers lack the training to improve these outcomes.

With Timor-Leste now thrust into a globalised world, a rapidly reconstructed education system has been exposed to a mixture of new policies, curricula and educational practices, and change has come quickly, resulting in tensions in this and other areas of life, often with historical antecedents. Issues of languages and literacies, plus a low level of education quality throughout the system shape the contemporary eduscape and the practices of the students, teachers and other stakeholders within it. The eduscape is both localised and historically situated, with intergenerational tensions apparent within it. The Timorese experience of the colonial legacy fundamentally shapes the topography and the flows of policies, curricula and texts through the eduscape. These are inherently Southern conditions, similar to those faced in other postcolonial societies.

The next chapter details the ethnographic research methods adopted to investigate the uses and utility of open online learning in Dili. This city proved a fascinating and productive field site, although the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted my access to it since 2020. Project participants, particularly students, proved to be keen collaborators, passionate about their country and their hope for its future, despite the range of challenges confronting them.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research methodology guiding the collection of data for this project. The research is ethnographic, based primarily on field notes and participant observation of various formal and non-formal education settings in and around Dili. This was combined with individual and small group interviews with university students, lecturers, internet hub managers and campus administrators as well as international scholarship students, alumni and a scholarship recruiter. These methods provided a rich body of data for interpretation, centring on the practices of individuals seeking quality education in Timor-Leste.

The chapter begins with a background to the theoretical basis for ethnography as part of the qualitative research tradition which informs the research design for this project, and describes the uses of ethnographic action research and mobile, narrative ethnography as part of the research design. It discusses the contemporary movement to decolonise research methods and its implications for this work, before reflecting on my positionality as a novice researcher, a teacher with an abiding interest in Timor-Leste and an outsider from the global North. It details my entrance to the field in a number of locations around central Dili, before outlining the principal data collection methods, namely participant observation and interviews. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key challenges to conducting fieldwork in Dili.

4.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The ethnographic research presented through this thesis takes a social constructivist/interpretivist stance, presupposing that "social reality is relative to the individuals involved and to the particular context in which they find themselves" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p.39) It assumes that individuals make meaning through interaction with others (Creswell, 2013; Gergen, 2001), recognising that multiple 'knowledges' can coexist depending on social, cultural, ethnic and other factors that lead to differing interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). This epistemological

framework underpins much research in teaching and learning (National Academy of Sciences, 2004; von Gaserfeld, 1995), including online and distance learning (Anderson & Dron, 2011). It also leaves methodological space for the incorporation of more participatory, transformative approaches to qualitative enquiry (Creswell, 2013), which challenge the sustenance of dominant knowledge discourses (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2020). Qualitative research methods privilege the immersive study of social phenomena, helping the researcher to make sense of the distribution of power within a given social context (Lapan et al., 2012). This makes such methods ideal for studies of practice, and for the purposes of this thesis, Southern agency, which is concerned with the ways in which individuals in the global South act to gain and exercise power.

The use of ethnographic methods to study practice has precedent in anthropology and sociology (Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 1989; Wacquant, 2004), in educational research (Corbett, 2007; Lynch et al., 2016; Willis, 1977) and increasingly in researching online experience (Baker, 2013; Landri, 2013; Parker Webster & Marques da Silva, 2013). The global exponential growth of technologically mediated education opens new spaces to observe online, face-to-face and hybrid learning environments, and the emergent education practices that result. Forsey (2018, p.443) asserts that "[t]echnologised learning demands shifts in how we imagine and experience the doing of learning and teaching" and with a recent trend towards datafication in education and its ethical implications (Jarke & Breiter, 2019, Lewis et al., 2022), ethnographic research methods provide a means of capturing insights into educational experiences that might otherwise be missed by quantitative approaches such as data analytics (boyd & Crawford, 2012).

Ethnographic research is often associated with the 'thick description' of cultural phenomena (Geertz, 1976), and Nader (2011) emphasizes that *"ethnography is a theory of description"* (p. 211), helping the researcher to capture the 'essence' of a particular field (Jeffrey, 2018). Ethnographic methods enable the researcher to see both the remarkable in the ordinary and vice versa, countering the superficiality of the contemporary world and its "undifferentiated, bland sameness" (Silverman, 2017, p.17). It requires the researcher to become more attuned to the nuances and subtle

shifts within a research field. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.4) ethnography involves:

> a significant *development* of the ordinary modes of making sense of the world that we all use in our mundane lives, in a manner that is attuned to the specific purposes of producing research knowledge. (Authors' emphasis)

Beyond description, ethnography involves interpretation and analysis of the data collected, shifting between inductive thinking as data is collected, and deductive thinking based on the application of an emergent theory (Madden, 2020). Doing ethnography requires building trust with participants, and as such is a more personal form of qualitative research, requiring empathy and sensitivity to often-shifting conditions within the field (Iphofen, 2020).

During the research design phase, conventional ethnographic methods were selected for this project as a means of investigating the proposition that MOOCs and OERs can provide quality educational opportunities to people in Timor-Leste, through the use of participant observation and interviews described in section 4.6 below. These methods were employed in the first two periods of field research in 2015 (five weeks) and 2016 (six weeks), to explore the possibilities of adopting open online learning. Once it was established that some individuals were already learning online, the research focussed on interviewing these people and recording their impressions of this experience, as well as introducing individuals to open online learning resources related to their fields of work and/or study.

The research also adopted principles of narrative ethnography, looking to compose a story from a collection of stories (Bönisch-Brednich, 2018). In Part 2, Chapters 8 and 9 present accounts of people positioned within the Timorese eduscape (as discussed in Chapter 4, Section 5) and beyond, illustrating broader themes emerging from the data. The aim here was not to privilege a small group of participants and marginalise others, but to give the collected data a human face. In the sociology of education narrative portraits enable research to focus on the individuals behind the data (Forsey, 2010b), and stories were chosen as representative accounts of the lived experience of the participant group. Individual narrative accounts, including the Portrait of a Cohort in Chapter 1, have been adopted in

anthropological studies, including of people living in the global South (Miller, 2009). Overemphasis on coding can lead to the atomisation of the subject of research (Forsey, 2012), which “suppresses the standpoint of those studied” (Nespor & Barylske, 1991, p.810). Using individual ethnographic portraits also allows a more authentic participant ‘voice’ within the research. Miller (2009, p.17) refers to “the empathy of ethnography, immersed in the lives of specific people, often friends, as much as informants.” This was a key aspect of attempting to decolonise these conventional ethnographic methods (see section 4.3 below), recognising the importance of representing individual accounts with a commitment to fidelity, while remaining conscious of the biases I bring to the research.

The third and final, more sustained period of fieldwork in Dili in 2017 employed ethnographic action research (EAR), a form of participatory action research (PAR) originally developed to explore opportunities for ICTs to empower communities living in poverty in South Asia (Tacchi et al., 2003). Participatory action research (PAR) aims at social transformation (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991) and has an established pedigree in educational research (Berg, 2004; Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, Efron & Ravid, 2020), including in the global South (Bath, 2009; Somekh, 2005). The action research cycle involves *planning* an intervention, in this case blending MOOC content with regular (usually weekly) face-to-face study meets, then *doing* the intervention. The blended nature of the research involved myself and a group of participants agreeing on a regular time to meet in a classroom with an internet connection. The first meeting orientated participants to the basic architecture of the MOOC platform and the course subject matter. Then each week we would meet to discuss the content of a week of the course, exploring new ideas and how they could apply to their professional context. To help participants with limited internet access, myself or another participant would download course video content to a shared hard drive or USB for offline viewing in their free time. At the same time, I *observed* and took detailed fieldnotes, before *reflecting* on the experience with participants, including conducting individual and focus group interviews, to incorporate participant feedback.

EAR involves participants as active co-constructors of knowledge throughout the research process (Bath, 2009; Tacchi, 2020). While time constraints in the field

only allowed single cycles of research, these contributed to developing a practical understanding of the benefits and challenges of engaging with open online learning resources as a group of peers. The collaborative dynamic of blending MOOCs provided a valuable opportunity to refresh my teaching skills after five years away from the classroom, helping reorientate myself to the field. It also proved a useful approach in scaffolding participant digital literacies and providing an opportunity to explore new concepts as a group. This approach was used in the research which comprises Chapter 7 of this thesis, where a 4-week MOOC on English language teacher professional development was blended with weekly study meets.

This project involved an element of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 2009). As ethnography stretches the conventions of fieldwork as the long-term occupation of a single site, the research took place in locations across Dili, but also outside Timor-Leste. I conducted interviews, both face-to-face and online using FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp, with international scholarship students in Australia, the UK, New Zealand and the USA, allowing the collection of data to continue beyond the bounds of the Dili field site. We maintained contact with at least five scholarship recipients moving between Timor-Leste and the sites of their scholarships between 2017 and 2022, to learn more about their experiences of international study.

As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded across 2020 and into 2021 it became clear that I would not be able to return to Dili before the thesis deadline, digital communication was the only way to maintain contact with participants and check in on their educational progress, which had methodological implications. Mobile ethnography in a digital format is no less ethnographic than remaining moored in a particular field site (Forsey, 2018), virtual ethnographic methods are no less 'real' than physical experience (Shumar & Madison, 2013) and online data collection methods are arguably equally as ethnographic as those conducted face-to-face (Delamont & Atkinson, 2021). In this project, online interviews were particularly valuable for gathering data while not 'on the ground' in Dili, a situation Landri (2013 p.239) describes as "embodied, distributed and mobile".

4.3 Decolonising conventional ethnography

Chapter 2 sections 4 and 5 of this thesis details the implications of colonialism for social theory, and research methods are not immune to this scrutiny. Sociology, like anthropology (Asad, 1975), has deep colonial roots (Go, 2013b), with colonial ways of thinking and representing the world deeply embedded in what Meghji (2021) calls the 'colonial episteme', which persists in research methods to this day. The post-colonial era coincided with the 'crisis of representation' in social science, arising from postmodern and postcolonial critiques of knowledge production (Delamont, 2011). Critiques of research methods have interrogated the blanket assumptions of research as an exclusively Northern preserve (Connell, 2008) contributing to some greater good, while marginalizing Southern peoples as the object of research, to be studied, classified and represented by the global metropole (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2008).

Ethnography in Timor-Leste has its origins in the work of Portuguese amateur researcher missionaries, soldiers and administrators from the late nineteenth century. They were limited to basic ethnographic description and classification of ethno-linguistic groups (Castelo, 2017) and the research was used primarily as a colonial instrument of power, studying local customs such as marriage and death rites, as a way to codify and thereby control these practices (Kammen, 2015). Ethnographic research conducted by the MAT (*Missão Antropológica de Timor*, 'Timor Anthropological Mission', in Portuguese) established in 1953, collected anthropometric measurements from the Timorese population to justify a racial hierarchy. According to Castelo, the Portuguese dictatorship viewed its overseas territories as "privileged terrain for Portuguese scientists and 'Portuguese science'. It viewed the production of knowledge as a utilitarian tool for legitimising and perpetuating the empire" (Castelo, 2017, p. 631).

In 1966 a Franco-Portuguese ethnographic project led by Ruy Cinatti, a Portuguese colonial administrator, poet and Oxford-trained anthropologist, and French anthropologist Louis Berthe, conducted research across Portuguese Timor. This was arguably the first research of this kind conducted free from a strong Portuguese colonial rationale, marking an important shift in Timor-Leste's history as

an ethnographic field site (Castelo, 2017). It should be noted however that Cinatti acted as a 'gatekeeper' to non-Portuguese foreign researchers, facilitating introductions with local tribal leaders and colonial administrators (Castelo, 2017; Hicks, 2017). Social research was restricted during the Indonesian occupation (McWilliam & Traube, 2011b) and Gunn (2007) notes an ethnographic 'gap' during this period, "precisely at the time of greatest culture loss in the half-island's history of contact with the outside world" (p.95). An ethnographic anthology entitled *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia* (J. Fox, 1980) includes 6 chapters on Timur Timur (the Indonesian name for Timor as a province of Indonesia) based on fieldwork conducted before the Indonesian occupation, without any reference to the effect of military occupation on Timorese society and culture.

The post-independence era has witnessed a profusion of ethnographic research in Timor-Leste, with two major volumes of ethnographic work published. The first, *Land and Life in Timor-Leste: Ethnographic Essays* (McWilliam & Traube, 2011a), provides accounts of social renewal in a post-conflict society, with a particular focus on "situated processes of social renewal" (p.2) concerning issues of land and community central to Timorese culture. An anthology of ethnographic research published in 2017, entitled *Fieldwork in Timor-Leste: Understanding Social Practice Through Change* (Nygaard-Christensen & Bexley, 2017), is organised into chapters on research in Portuguese Timor, the challenges of conducting fieldwork in a new nation, the themes of 'spatiality and temporality', fieldwork in a post-conflict context and finally researcher positionality. In a review of this volume, I commented on the dearth of Timorese-authored ethnographic studies, with just one Timorese-authored chapter featured (M. King, 2018), while *Land and Life in Timor-Leste* contains no chapters authored by Timorese researchers.

While encouraging ethnographic research on Timor-Leste by Timorese researchers is not the only means of promoting more decolonised research, it remains a goal worth pursuing. Kaur and Klinkert (2021) assert that decolonizing ethnography primarily involves democratizing ethnographic methods, observing that:

> Walking the walk needs to go hand in hand with talking the talk, yet deep complexities have led to an over-academization

> of the decolonial project to restrict its reach and stifle its potential (p. 250).

This 'over-academization' could be one explanation for the lack of ethnographic research by Timorese authors. Anthropologist Josh Trindade (2020), whose work is cited in the previous chapter, describes other challenges of becoming a Timorese researcher, including the limitations of the education system, difficulties securing funding, and the simple fact that "Timorese tend to value foreign researchers more than local ones" (p.220). Trindade also points to the influences of language and the 'colonization of mind' causing Timorese to view endogenous languages and traditional culture as 'backward' in spite of their renewal in the post-independence era. Clearly, decolonizing research methods needs to be a priority in this context.

Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, pp.3-6) propose a number of actions to decolonize qualitative research, including *critical reflexivity* on the part of the researcher, which for this project involved taking a collaborative approach to generating and collecting data, while remaining cognisant of the power asymmetries between researcher and researched in ethnographic methods, particularly within interviews (Sinha, 2021). They recommend *reciprocity*, allowing for participant self-determination, which in this research involved regularly checking participant consent, particularly if discussing potentially controversial topics. Reciprocity also involved keeping interview structures open, to allow participants to speak openly and voice their opinions as part of an explicit effort to co-construct knowledge based on their experience. This was part of a broader process of building trust and forming relationships to nurture a more collaborative research effort (Mosher, 2017).

Thambinathan and Kinsella also recommend *embodying a transformative praxis* as part of decolonizing research. In this research, introducing research participants to MOOCs and OERs as well as blending MOOCs with face-to-face study meets, represented an attempt at more transformative practices, offering a new and potentially liberatory means to facilitate online professional development attempted successfully elsewhere in the global South (Firmansyah & Timmis, 2016; Marrinan et al., 2015). However, while it may be participatory, EAR is not by extension decolonized research. As lead researcher I devised the research questions, chose which courses to

blend, and facilitated the study meets, whereas for this research to be truly participatory and decolonized, participants would have been involved in negotiating these elements from the earliest stages of the research process (Lenette & Nesvaderani, 2022). This was not possible given the conventions of research proposals at my university, which require the student to undertake this element of their work, and I was required to submit a proposal for approval before I first entered the field as a researcher. The co-authored publication of a cycle of EAR with two Timorese teacher participants was an attempt to democratise the research, give due recognition to their contribution and present co-constructed new knowledge. As co-authors on Chapter 7 we collaborated to identify key benefits and challenges to blending MOOCs from the focus group interview data. Luan and Lopes added key insights and personal reflections on the learning experience, and subsequently presented the results of the research at the Timor-Leste Studies Association conference in Dili in June 2017.

The need for collaborative, participative methods is particularly important when this research involves the use of new technologies. Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (2008) warns of the coloniality of the capitalist imperative implicit in some research, "[f]eeding consumption, tuberculosis of the marketplace" (p.102). Technology can entrench socioeconomic and gender divides, despite the social justice agenda driving many projects to open up educational access through ICTs (Pegrum, 2014). In the research I was mindful of not promoting a form of technological solutionism, and never encouraged people with limited resources to purchase these technologies, working with the resources available for free, notably the various internet hubs around Dili.

Reflecting on my position in the research as a white Australian male researcher adopting conventional ethnographic methods in a Southern context, the question arises as to whether these methods can ever truly be decolonised. Approaches to decolonising research range from adapting existing methods through to totally reimagining them. There are further considerations given this research was conducted under the auspices of an elite Australian university, with clear expectations of what does and does not constitute doctoral research, even as the higher education sector faces calls for deeper engagement with decolonization in both curricula (see for

example Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019) and research (Lipscombe et al., 2021). Although researchers have agency, they work within a set of structuring conditions, notably different to those faced by Southern agents, but nonetheless conditions which constrain and enable the practice of research and its outputs, including negotiating the coloniality implicit in the methodological and epistemic legacy of the social sciences.

At minimum, critical reflexivity when conducting ethnographic research has given me pause to consider my privileged position in this field, regularly reminding myself to be empathetic and respectful, to listen to participants and foreground their voices, their stories, opinions, reflections and aspirations. This has included giving voice to individual accounts in this thesis and expressing gratitude for the opportunity to work with participants as peers, where possible remediating power differentials that inevitably arise.

4.4 Position(s) of the researcher

Conducting any social research, including ethnography, requires critical reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Brookfield, 2009; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), asking questions regarding the researcher's representation of reality, including "whose reality do they represent? How is this reality portrayed, and who judges its validity?" (Jeffrey, 2018, p.113). These questions underline researcher positionality, defined as:

> how one's position within the context of the field - in terms of identity markers like socioeconomic status, race, nationality, gender, sexuality, and ability status, among others - shapes the way that participants interact with you, whether they do so at all, what they share with you, and ultimately the results of the research (Brasher, 2020, p.297-298).

The impact of positionality is amplified when researchers from the global North conduct research in the South, where power differentials between researcher and participants are often stark (Brasher, 2020). Ethnographic research requires a creative synthesis of etic or 'outsider' and emic or 'insider' perspectives requiring methodological reflexivity (Madden, 2020).

As a PhD candidate I was conscious of my position as a novice researcher in the field, shared by others in similar situations (Millora et al., 2020). I was able to draw on my familiarity with the field based on time spent living and working there previously, while using ethnographic methods which I had had some previous experience of as an English language teacher. In developing my research skills while conducting research, I always aimed to uphold an ethical commitment to "protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants" (Iphofen, 2020, p.17), ensuring that participants were comfortable with my presence and able to withdraw consent to participate at any time.

An important identity marker within the research was my lifelong interest in Timor-Leste. My personal interest in this country began when my grandmother told me stories my grandfather had told her of serving on the Australian navy warship the *HMAS Arunta*, evacuating the last Australian commandos off the island as a rear-guard action against the Japanese army advance toward Australia in 1942. News about the Indonesian occupation of Timor was very limited through my childhood in the 1970s and 1980s, and I became interested in the Timorese independence movement during my undergraduate studies in the early 1990s. In 1999 I participated in pro-Timorese independence marches in Perth and closely followed events through the Australian media.

In 2002, the year that Timor-Leste became independent, I enrolled in a Master's Degree by Research preliminary course in Political Science at UWA, writing a dissertation on Civilian-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) in UN peacebuilding missions in Timor-Leste and Cambodia. Upon completion I realised I was interested in studying Timor-Leste specifically, and in 2005 I travelled there for 5 weeks. This experience affirmed my deep interest in the country, and in early 2009 I took up a teaching role at LELI school. This interest in Timor-Leste and its people can potentially bias the research, and I was conscious during fieldwork of being able to reflect on my eagerness to 'do good' and not become another well-intentioned expatriate 'do-

gooder' adding their voice to the cacophony of international advice on education among other national issues.

Teaching in Dili gave me valuable insights into the local educational culture. Student-centred pedagogical approaches picked up in my teacher training in the late 1990s were still new in Timor-Leste, and rote learning and recitation, as part of teacher-centred instruction, were ingrained in the education system (M. Quinn, 2013). I also first encountered students' use of Google Translate to compose writing homework and saw evidence of a 'copy-paste' academic culture, where there was often evidence of plagiarism from the internet in work submitted. Students were eager to develop their English language skills as part of their professional development, realising that English language skills were crucial for success in the job market once UNMIT ended in 2012. This gave me some perspective on the underlying student motivations and their particular study needs.

After submitting my research proposal in 2015, the periods of field work in 2015 and 2016 allowed me to gain an understanding of the changes in the eduscape since my time living and teaching in Dili, and the impact of technology, particularly internet access via mobile phones. Interviewing educational stakeholders, I was able to leverage my position as someone 'in the industry' and participants spoke freely about the challenges they saw to quality education, both online and off. When I returned to Dili in 2017 to conduct more sustained fieldwork, I had been unable to secure research funding beyond a basic postgraduate travel allowance, and so I returned to casual English teaching at LELI for the first time since 2011. This meant I was restricted to evenings, periods between classes and weekends to write up research, but it also created many more opportunities to observe and interact with Timorese adult learners. It was also a considerable benefit in gaining more emic perspectives as I shared an office with the Timorese teachers who would participate in the EAR cycle detailed in Chapter 7. These teachers became colleagues I saw almost daily, creating opportunities for both formal interviews and other, more casual conversations over coffee.

At the weekly English Conversation Club at UNTL I assumed the position of volunteer teacher, which introduced me to many of the students and other young people who participated in the research. It was a relatively simple task to schedule interviews with 1-4 participants in vacant lecture rooms on campus before and after the conversation club. Through my training as an IELTS speaking examiner I was able to help participants improve their English and prepare for the structure of IELTS speaking exams, which they would take as part of being shortlisted for most international scholarship programs.

When blending MOOCs with face-to-face study meets and offering drop-in sessions to introduce open online learning to interested parties at the *Uma Amerika*, I adopted the role of "social-cultural animator", trying to "help breathe life into the projects and the underlying dynamic of the communities in which they are located" (Tacchi et al., 2003, p.27). This involved the uses of digital media, observing participants 'over their shoulder' while they studied online, which was one of the most illuminating perspectives taken in this research. I scaffolded the early online learning experiences for some participants, which enabled me to go back to first principles of online learning and avoid some of the assumptions about young people's digital literacy development and the widely debunked theory of the 'digital native' (Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Selwyn, 2009), a theory with even less credence in the global South (W. Chen & Wellman, 2004). There were moments within the research where I recognised that I needed to step back and let the participants do the best they could under difficult circumstances. At other moments, described in section 4.7 below, I accepted that what we were attempting was impossible given the constraints of power outages, internet connectivity and other external forces. In these instances, it was important to explain to participants that it was in no way their fault, and to offer further opportunities to those interested in persisting.

Although my position as researcher/practitioner gave me access to insider perspectives in various formal and non-formal learning interactions, it is worth noting some personal physical characteristics which also had a bearing on my position in interactions with participants and the community in the field. I am 195 centimetres tall, which is a regular source of fascination and mirth for Timorese people. It also sets

me apart in classrooms and other physical spaces, and so I needed to be conscious of my presence in amongst participants who were often considerably smaller than me, not wanting to seem dominating or imposing in these spaces.

Among the most important and visible identity markers was as a *malae*. The word is a broad descriptor in Tetum for anyone in Timor-Leste who comes from somewhere else, hence the common translation of 'foreigner' or 'outsider'. *Malae* can have a connotation of denoting someone new and novel, but can also be used to describe incomprehensible actions of outsiders, or *malae bulak* (in Tetum, 'crazy foreigners') or unwanted interventions by newcomers not knowing their place - *malae la diak* ('no good foreigners'). Hence, I was conscious of my position as a *malae* white Australian researcher. Some scholars, including Connell (2008), argue that Australia is a country of the global South albeit holding an ambiguous status as a settler colony (Collyer, 2021) but regardless, as a researcher now residing in London, perhaps *the* global academic metropole, I was aware of the coloniality inherent in my position as researcher as a citizen of a wealthy country, which allowed me to conduct this research. Relations between Timor-Leste and Australia have become strained in recent years, notably over maritime borders and access to oil and gas reserves (Dixon, 2021), but it is noteworthy that I never experienced any hostility working with participants because of my nationality, or for any other reason.

4.5 Accessing the Field

Several sites become key loci for fieldwork as part of this thesis, these were spaces where students and other mostly young people looking to access educational opportunity congregated. Each is an important point on the Timorese eduscape, where flows of policy, curricula and the influence of technology intersect with the built environment. In accessing these sites, I followed the research ethics as agreed per my university Human Ethics application, making sure to gain permission from site managers and the participants before conducting research.

Figure 5

Map of Central Dili and Key Project Field Sites.

(*Source: OpenStreetMap [CC BY-SA 2.0]*)

Legend:

1. UNTL Liceu campus
2. *Uma America* and UNTL campus café
3. UNTL English Language Centre (ELC)
4. Xanana Reading Room
5. *Largo Lecidere* Wi-Fi hotspot
6. *Parque 5 de Maio* Wi-Fi hotspot
7. LELI School

UNTL Liceu campus

This was a central site for the project, containing *Uma Amerika*, the English Language Centre (ELC), the English Conversation Club (ECC), and various social spaces on campus, including open seating areas, small gardens, the spaces outside lecture rooms, and opportunities to observe educational practices both online and in

classrooms. It was an ideal site to meet and interview students, lecturers, internet hub managers and other education stakeholders, and is an important location in the Timorese eduscape as the main teacher training institution. The main site was the Liceu campus, immediately behind the *Palacio do Governo* ('Government Palace' in Portuguese) and the National Parliament in the centre of Dili.

One of my first visits to UNTL in 2015 involved presenting a paper based on my thesis research proposal at the 2015 Timor-Leste Studies Association conference (M. King, 2016), which prompted productive discussion and interest around the potential for MOOCs and OERs to improve the quality of education in Timor-Leste. Immediately following this I attended a second conference entitled 'Pathways in Education' co-convened by Victoria University Australia on the UNTL campus (Townsend & Hill, 2015). These events provided an excellent opportunity to meet and interview local education leaders. I gained permission from the UNTL senior administration to conduct research on campus, and in 2017 I was invited to speak at a research symposium to share my preliminary research findings.

Figure 6.

The Central Area of UNTL Liceu Campus, Dili May, 2017. Taken from the student café area (new in 2017), with the classrooms used for the ECC at far left and the *Uma Amerika* at far right (author's photo).

UMA AMERIKA

This building, consisting of two demountable buildings combined into a single room space, was adapted for use as a repository of information on American culture and

education. The space is funded by the US State Department, but administered through the university, and housed a modest collection of books on English language learning and exam preparation, American history and famous people as well as university handbooks, with the walls adorned with the pennants of various US colleges. It also contained 8 internet-connected iMac desktop computers which visitors could book in 30-minute instalments, although on any given day one or two would be out of service.

During my fieldwork in 2017 I became friendly with the *Uma Amerika* manager, a scholarship alumnus who coincidentally became engaged to be married to one of my teacher colleagues at LELI school. With his permission and assistance, I offered a weekly 'drop-in' session on Tuesday mornings, to help visitors discover open online learning resources. Participants would come and explain what subject they were interested in studying and together we would search for relevant MOOCs and OERs. This is where I met three of the participants whose stories feature in later chapters. I also facilitated an online IELTS exam preparation course 'IELTSX' created by the University of Queensland, blended with face-to-face study meetings with a group of participants selected by the US State Department office which funds the *Uma Amerika*. This had mixed success, with a number of hurdles including intermittent internet access and participants' existing work and study commitments hindering progress, as well as considerable variance in participants' English language ability. The US embassy had experimented with providing access to online courses to UNTL students, and promoted 'eLearning@UNTL' through signage around the building.

Figure 7.

The Author Introducing Timorese Students to Open Online Learning Resources in Uma Amerika. Dili May 2017 (Author's photo).

UNTL English Language Centre

Another important field site on UNTL's Liceu campus was the Australian government-funded English Language Centre (ELC), situated less than 200 metres across campus from the *Uma Amerika*. Again, I gained permission from the centre manager to facilitate open online learning with students who visited the centre and she became a valuable research participant, as an education administrator, teacher and scholarship recipient. While providing a similar educational service to the *Uma Amerika*, this centre only allowed access to enrolled English Teaching students at UNTL. The ELC provided a modest library of books donated by Australian charities on English language education, with around 30 desktop computers, of which approximately 15 were connected to the internet, while 15 were available for students to access offline digital English language resources and word-processing software for writing

assignments. This was another ideal place to meet research participants; English teaching was the only subject students could major in at UNTL which was taught in English. In following up with the manager in August 2021, I discovered that administration of the ELC had been handed over to the university itself after my last visit in 2017, and that the manager had returned to her centre management role upon the completion of postgraduate scholarship studies in Australia and was reemployed to manage the centre by UNTL.

In 2017 I discovered two new sites in and around the Liceu campus. A small café selling instant coffee, pot noodles and other snacks had appeared between the *Uma Amerika* and the ELC on the UNTL campus, and this became a more informal location to meet students. The Peace Coffee café, named perhaps optimistically given Timor-Leste's history of conflict, also appeared in between my visits in 2016 and 2017 around 50 metres from the campus. In mid-2021 Joao, introduced in the Portrait of a Cohort, accessed the café's Wi-Fi to speak with me over FaceTime for approximately an hour, although the connection was very poor and we were cut off a number of times. Elsewhere on campus, locations such as outside lecture rooms and around some of the simple garden seating areas were ideal places to chat with students and lecturers on campus, to ask about their studies and future plans, their access to ICTs and how they used them. I also photographed the various international scholarship promotional posters placed on notice boards around campus, each exhorting students to apply in order to 'build prosperity' and 'build a better future' for them and their country (see Figure 8 below) which informed the research on these scholarships which comprises Chapter 9.

Figure 8.

Posters Advertising Applications for the New Zealand and Australia Awards Scholarships on UNTL Liceu Campus, April 2017. (Author's photo)

XANANA READING ROOM

The *Xanana Reading Room (XRR)* is a public library space named for Timorese resistance hero, former president and prime minister José Alexandre 'Xanana' Gusmão, situated near Lecidere market, and funded by ODA from the New Zealand government. It contains a range of reference books, mostly on regional history, politics and language, with 10 internet-connected desktop computers, although on average approximately 8 were working and available to book, again in 30-minute increments. It proved another useful place to meet participants, and I often bumped into students I had spoken to at UNTL.

One thing that set the XRR apart from the centres at UNTL was the general appearance of the reading and study area. At the *Uma Amerika* and ELC the books

were neatly arranged and in pristine condition, and some were still wrapped in the plastic they came in. At the XRR the space had the feeling of a working public library; the books I opened appeared well-thumbed and the shelves showed signs of regular searches and rearranging. The three internet hubs shared one trait in common - the computer stations were all regularly occupied whenever I visited, usually with groups of young people sitting around outside, patiently waiting for their session. It was here that I met Octavio, the international scholarship alumnus who features in Chapter 9, when he gave a talk to young people on opportunities for self-improvement through learning.

LELI SCHOOL

Lorosa'e English Language Institute (LELI) is the main private English language school in Dili, and proved a valuable field site as well as being my workplace during my final period of fieldwork. This was an ideal place to spend time with adult Timorese students and teachers, and observe their uses of mobile ICTs inside and outside the classroom. As part of my teaching load, I ran a series of IELTS preparation workshops with candidates who had been shortlisted for the Australia Awards scholarships, and learned much about this group's aspirations and motivations in the classroom and through conversations before and after class. It was here that I met a shortlisted candidate from the Ministry of Finance who had completed a Coursera MOOC on Public Private Partnerships (PPP) with three colleagues as part of their professional development. I interviewed some of the MOOC participants to gauge their opinion of the experience, which was roundly positive.

This was also where I met the 10 Timorese teachers providing either English language training English to other Timorese students or Tetum to *malae* including Australian and American consular staff. Seven of these teachers volunteered to participate in the ethnographic action research element of this project (see Chapter 7). The school owner supported my research and welcomed the opportunity for CPD for his staff. His buy-in was important, as the school subsidized 50% of the cost of MOOC certification for LELI teachers and helped persuade staff of the value of the

training. The school also had some of the most reliable internet connectivity and a back-up generator for the inevitable power blackouts, meaning I could go online here even when the connection was intermittent in other field sites.

PUBLIC WI-FI HOTSPOTS

The approximately 10 public spaces dotted around central Dili provided excellent opportunities to observe Timorese people in more informal, not explicitly education-focussed internet access hubs, which were utilised mostly by students as part of their studies. Here I was a casual observer, asking people in Tetum what they were doing, observing with their permission, engaging in conversation in both English and Tetum, telling those who were interested about my research. They were very forthcoming about their experiences and somewhat stoic about the quality of internet connection offered in these hotspots, but they accepted it and I was regularly struck by their patience and resilience.

Figure 9.

Parque 5 de Maio, Dili, June 2015. (Author's photo)

This site is described in the prologue to Chapter 8; note the Indonesian era statue at top right.

The two hotspot sites I frequented most often were the *Parque 5 de Maio* (see Figure 9 above) described in the prologue to Chapter 8, a park located between Hotel Timor and the harbour, and a covered structure in near the Lecidere market. In both places groups of students congregated throughout the day, in any weather, to access the internet starting for 20 centavos (20c US) per hour. Particularly in the former site, students tended to be grouped according to the university subject they were studying, gathered around often-battered laptops waiting patiently for websites to load. Joao, Melati and Emiliana from the Portrait of a Cohort in Chapter 1 reported accessing the internet from these locations.

4.6 Ethnographic methods

Having described the field sites central to this project, I now turn to the ethnographic methods incorporated, principally participant observation and interviews, as well as sociograms, which allowed participants to 'map' their language use in day-to-day life.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is the research method most closely equated with ethnographic research (Delamont, 2011; Madden, 2020) where the researcher needs to heighten sensory modes, call on existing social skills and adapt to various, often changing social situations (de Walt & de Walt, 2011). It combines two separate processes, creating paradoxical tensions between simultaneously participating in an activity and observing it. While Delamont (2012) points out that the researcher is seldom a truly 'active' participant, in this research I was often facilitating an online learning experience or a blended study meeting, which made recording observations challenging, but de Walt and de Walt point out these tensions can be creative, as it proved in this project.

Fieldnotes are an important part of research writing, both part of 'doing' fieldwork and then 'writing' the ethnography (Corwin & Clemens, 2012). As records of participant observation these notes are seldom raw data, but are partially 'cooked' by the observer's experience, reflecting and interpreting even as they observe (Madden, 2020). The notes a researcher records are a representation of social interactions consciously or unconsciously shaped by their worldview, and need triangulation to add fidelity (Corwin & Clemens, 2012). As a serial diary keeper since the early 1990s, I found my field notes taking over my regular diary entries. When in Dili I attempted to separate field notes from more personal entries, however I often leafed back through my 'analogue' diary entries for a record of particular observations. I endeavoured to end each day of field research in Dili writing up the notes, expanding and reflecting upon events of the day out of the heat of the moment. The concept of participant observation as an educational research method was also a familiar process, as I had experience as an English language teacher in writing up classroom observations and reflections on my teaching practice as part of professional development. It was then a case of further developing those modes of sense-making. As part of this fieldwork, I took over 200 photos on my mobile phone, initially as a memory aid as part of my fieldnotes, but also as a way of adding contextual depth (Perera, 2019). A number of these photos have been included throughout Part 1 of the thesis.

Participant observation during the first two field visits first involved time spent orientating myself to the field, the Wi-Fi hotspots and UNTL internet hubs in particular,

to get a better sense of who was using these spaces and what they were used for. Obviously, the internet is a source of much more than learning opportunities, and the students I met were spending most of their time online scrolling through social media, downloading music and games, and searching for new products online.

I also observed people using the internet to learn in these places, including one example which was published as a vignette in a recent volume on mobile learning:

> In visits to Dili between 2015 and 2017 I 'hung out' at the Wi-Fi hotspots that have opened on university campuses and in public spaces around the city. I also travelled around on my bicycle and on foot, observing people on their mobile phones and asking them about their practices. Many were accessing social media, downloading music and playing games. Occasionally I would encounter people using their phones to do research (consulting 'Mr Google', as one participant jokingly phrased it) for both formal and non-formal study. One morning I met a young woman sitting under a tree in a park with her headphones plugged into a basic model smartphone, with a Korean language textbook laid out in front of her. When I asked what she was doing, she explained that she was preparing to travel to South Korea to join the growing number of Timorese young people working in the hospitality industry there. She was practising her Korean writing while chatting online to a Timorese friend already working there, who was helping her with her study. (M. King, quoted in Pegrum, 2019 p.136)

Students accessed pages in Indonesian and Portuguese, as well as English, according to need and literacy level. Google, or "Mr Google" as participants euphemistically described the search engine, was an important source of new knowledge, as well as social media, sharing new scholarship opportunities via dedicated Facebook groups, blogs and YouTube channels.

During my final fieldwork visit I spent more time in classrooms and internet hubs, introducing students to MOOCs and OERs related to their areas of study, including resources to help students improve their academic English skills. The weekly drop-in sessions at *Uma Amerika* gave participants an opportunity to explore options for open online learning with my assistance. This involved establishing what subjects

they were interested in studying, conducting a brief online search for relevant MOOCs or OERs and helping them register if necessary. I then observed the participants as they engaged with the resources, answered their questions and helping them with early activities such as quiz questions. Tensions again arose between facilitating learning activities and recording observations, which was often challenging but provided a valuable source of data.

In blending MOOCs with study meets the same issue arose of regularly switching roles between facilitator and observer, with field notes reduced to brief phrases recording challenges and breakthroughs as we discussed course content. I photographed the whiteboard after each session to help remember more difficult concepts that had required explanation in writing. As soon as possible after each meeting I wrote up more detailed notes, reflecting on key moments in the session and considering how to improve the next meeting. In sum the fieldnotes compiled combined with interview transcripts built a picture of key points on the Timorese eduscape, helping to make sense of the practices enacted by participants within them.

INTERVIEWS

An important element of the ethnographic data collected came from audio recorded and transcribed individual and small group (2-7 people) interviews with a total of 127 participants. A table with the participants' basic anonymised profiles is provided in Appendix 1. Interviews are essentially a form of guided conversation; according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.18) "the process of knowing through conversations is intersubjective and social, involving interviewer and interviewee as co-constructors of knowledge." This is not to say that interview data is infallible; Bauer and Gaskell (2011) point out that interviews rely on informants' not always reliable accounts of the past. Nevertheless, they provide an opportunity for recording personal stories for narrative analysis (Riessman, 2012). They are most effective when employed as part of a set of ethnographic methods, for example by asking participants for their perspective on

particular phenomena observed by the researcher, as a way of triangulating that data (Forsey, 2012).

Effective interviewing involves gaining rapport with participants (Seidman, 2013), using active listening techniques (Forsey, 2010a; Seidman, 2013), and asking effective follow-up questions to elicit detail. Interview interactions are never entirely open or equal; inevitably there are power asymmetries between researcher and participant, and cross-cultural, gender, status, linguistic, age and other factors within the interview can reinforce these inequities (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), particularly given my positionality as an older, male, *malae* researcher from the global North. Seidman, (2013) points out that small gestures can help redress these imbalances, including arranging meeting times and places convenient to participants, being clear when explaining the purpose of the interview, and "valuing the words of the participant because those words are deeply connected to that participant's sense of worth" (p.111).

As interviewer, I was conscious that I determined the nature and topic of the interview, the questions asked and the interpretation of the knowledge produced as a result. One potential adverse outcome of these imbalances is that participants might provide answers they believe I wanted to hear, which has both epistemic and ethical consequences. Being reflexive while conducting interviews also entailed adapting questions based on responses and avoiding fully structured regimens, for example those around the efficacy of online education, to make it clear that, while I was interested in cases of individuals engaging with online education, this did not mean that if they had not used the internet for study, their interview contribution was no less valid. In seeking to maintain the fidelity of participant voices and capture an emic perspective through interview data (Creswell, 2013), all quotes in the thesis are reproduced verbatim, with some elision for brevity, and occasional bracketed edits for clarity where required.

In recruiting individuals to interview, initially I drew on my network of contacts from my previous time in Timor-Leste. Enquiring about local experiences of open online learning was often met with a negative response, however this was sometimes

appended with the comment along the lines of ‘but you should speak to so-and-so, they told me about an online course they tried’, and I would then seek out that person. Interviews during the first two visits were mostly with higher education stakeholders, including university academics and administrators, government staff, foreign education consultants and NGO staff. The questions followed an open-ended structure, directed at establishing how people viewed the internet as an educational resource and examples of these kinds of practices. These participants were often scholarship alumni, and so questioning turned to how they viewed the potential future applications of online learning in Timor-Leste. In the third visit interviews were predominantly conducted with university students, particularly those I met through the English conversation club and elsewhere on the UNTL campus, who were either keen to try open online learning, or had some previous experience of learning online.

Approximately half of the participants were interviewed individually, with the others in small groups, the aim being to give participants an equal voice and space to contribute their opinions Individual, or dyadic interactions, are generally more ‘in-depth’, allowing the exploration of a single personal worldview, whereas the group interview is a separate social entity in which participants interact with each other as well as the interviewer, producing an entirely different social dynamic (Bauer & Gaskell, 2011). Warren (2012) observes that the presence of peers can colour participant responses, and it was sometimes challenging to ensure that all participants had an equal opportunity to contribute.

An interesting example of the different kinds of responses can be seen by comparing individual and group interview reflections on the quality of higher education in Timor-Leste. Students sometimes spoke candidly about the quality of their university experience. For example, one individual participant commented:

> I have chosen ______ department and today I am fifth semester but the system of education is the lectures aren’t prepared well, it means the lecture plan for classes is unprepared… and one more thing is the material that they use is not good.

In a separate small group interview students were also clear in their views, with one participant saying:

> Our government should invest more in our education system, because our education has not been developed yet, and also a lack of facilities.

Before another participant added:

> Our education system in our country is still [in its] infancy, we can say that, so our government must have to develop our education system, most of the people in East Timor want to study.

This second response was a reply to the other student's comment above, rather than my initial question, offering a reason for the quality issues raised by the first speaker. Interactions between participants in small group interviews provide extra perspectives (Beitin, 2012) and complement the insights from the individual interviews. Many of the focus group interviews were lively but respectful discussions continued well after the recorder was switched off. On numerous occasions, I had to switch it back on as more points needed to be made. Many participants spoke afterwards about how they enjoyed the interview process and the opportunity to practice with a native speaker.

Interviews can have the propensity to become performative, possibly a symptom of the 'interview society', where participants might promote a particular personal narrative (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). One example of this recounted in the Portrait of a Cohort in Section 5 of Chapter 1 is Zé's memorised personal statement in an interview about his "full desire to pursue a degree abroad" which would be "the answers to my prayers and the opportunity of a lifetime". These kinds of part-preprepared responses some participants used showed they viewed their interview as an opportunity to practice for their scholarship applications. With other students I sensed an initial formality to many of the early interview responses, and it took a more open line of questioning, asking follow-up questions and seeking further information around certain answers, to elicit their opinions on some of the central issues around open online learning.

Language competencies, both mine and those of the participants, were a determinant of the cohort for this project. I speak basic Tetum, enough to engage in casual conversation, but not enough to conduct an in-depth interview. Conversely, participants needed to speak English at a level which enabled us to discuss topics requiring a breadth of vocabulary and command of language to express future aspirations and opinions. In sites like the *Uma Amerika* or the ECC meets it was possible after some conversation to discern which participants had the necessary language skills. The British Council Teaching for Success MOOCs recommended the course for learners with English language proficiency at level B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), and this became an informal yardstick of English language proficiency I sought in participants. In addition, the participant consent form was only provided in English, so I asked concept checking questions about the content of the Participant Information Form and Participant Consent Form and translated key terms into Tetum to ensure interviewees were aware of my ethical obligations to maintain participant privacy and anonymise their identity in the thesis.

Many participants were keen to practice their English, and they saw my research as an opportunity for them to practice their speaking skills specifically for the academic IELTS exam, which takes the form of an interview. This is one of the main reasons the number of interviews grew to over 120 by the end the fieldwork. Asking direct, early questions in basic English about participants' background and education history helped gauge the interviewee's English language level. If I felt the participant's English language level was too low, I would continue the interview but skip the later, more challenging questions about uses of the internet for education, while still giving these the participants the chance to gain the practice they were keen to receive. Those with stronger spoken English skills could contribute responses to questions such as their motivations for seeking quality education opportunities.

Some participants, such as Joao from the Portrait of a Cohort in Chapter 1 Section 5, Amelia from Chapter 8, and Maria from Chapter 9 were interviewed multiple times between 2015 and 2017 as their situation changed; scholarship applicants had been successful and were now scholars, scholars had graduated and

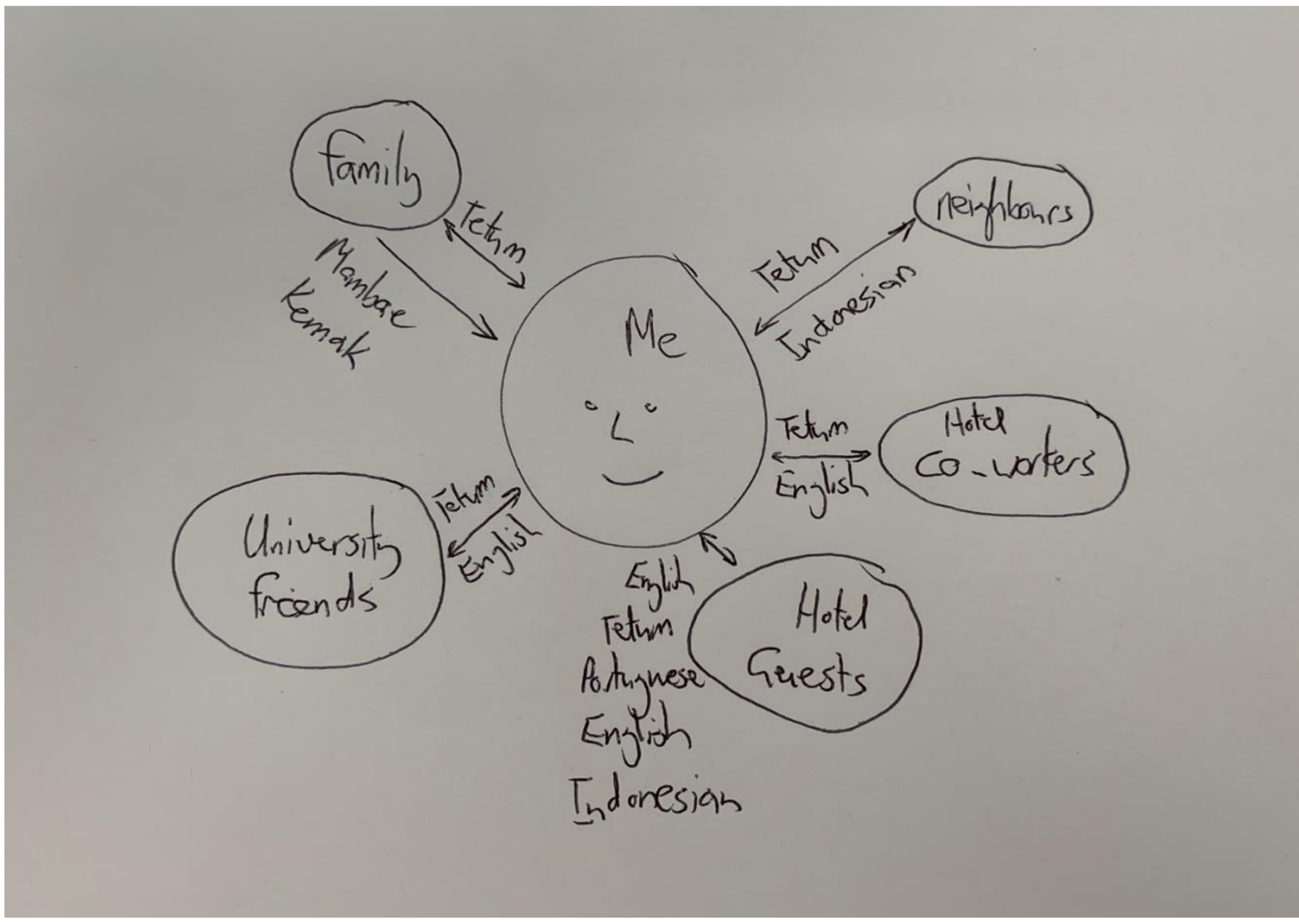
become alumni, and unsuccessful applicants continued seek scholarship options. For these participants the first descriptor in the interview log in Appendix 1 records the participant's status at the time of our first interview. These interviews provide valuable insights into scholarship students' experiences of transition from one status to another, reflecting the powerful opportunity for self-transformation these opportunities provide. They were also able to make informed comparisons of their education in Timor-Leste with their scholarship experience abroad.

Sociograms

An added, somewhat accidental element to the methods employed to record data on this project was the use of sociograms. Pictorial representations of social dynamics, in this case language use, are helpful not just to communicate research, but also as a means of participants contributing directly to the data gathering process (Tubaro et al., 2016). As a part of the FutureLearn MOOC 'Teaching for Success: The Classroom and the World' learners were invited to construct a sociogram representing the languages they spoke and the roles in which they used them. In interviews when asked about languages, participants often undercounted, not considering languages endogenous to Timor such as Mambae, Kemak and even the co-national language Tetum to 'count'. When blending this MOOC, the sociogram activity – described further in Chapter 6 – became an engaging means of comparing personal language literacies as part of the face-to-face component, revealing the plurilingual strengths of Timorese learners as they use a range of languages across different life roles, as well as in the classroom (Barnard et al., 2011). While I did not have permission to publish photographs of this work, Figure 10 below represents a composite of the kinds of sociograms participants produced, which gives some indication of the diversity of languages and roles in which Timorese employ them.

Figure 10.

The Author's Composite Impression of MOOC Participants' Language Sociograms from Fieldwork in 2017. (Author's photo).



4.7 FIELDWORK CHALLENGES

Across the periods of fieldwork between 2015 and 2017 I encountered a number of challenges which at times hampered the research. My field notes record numerous struggles with intermittent power and internet connectivity, and the challenges around explaining how to navigate online education resources to participants with low digital literacies. Some participants working on desktop computers were unused to functions like manipulating a mouse across a screen, mainly because their previous experience of accessing the internet via a mobile device. The following page from my field notes from a morning spent in the *Uma America* in April 2017 typifies some of these challenges. Note that Amelia's story is portrayed in Chapter 9 and Emiliana in Chapter 8.

> Internet is very slow this morning. Poor Amelia has been trying to log on for the past hour. Now the power is out and it has triggered an alarm that goes every 15 secs… hot.

> I just interviewed Paulo and Vicente wants to be interviewed too. Why do they want to be interviewed? Do they think perhaps it's good practice for scholarship applications? Yes, think so. Paulo made it really clear in his interview that he really wants to get a scholarship, but he said he likes the courses because you can study without leaving the country. They also want conversation practice… Power is off again. Emiliana has given up for today, she's sitting at a desk, only person left, reading her notes.

> Power is back on after about 20 mins of heat darkness and no internet. Amelia hasn't managed to get anything done after almost 2 hours of trying.

On another occasion I was scheduled to meet a group of English language education students at *Uma Amerika* to blend content from an online course with a group discussion. The internet was down, but anticipating this I had downloaded the videos to watch offline. Then when we tried to play the videos through a projector the room power cut out without warning. Finally, we tried huddling around my laptop watching the videos on screen, however the lack of air-conditioning soon made the room very, very uncomfortable. It was at this time that we realised that the power cut had been caused by someone diverting the main power source to provide power to a student concert that had been organised in the open space opposite and a powerful sound system was playing local rock music at ear-splitting volume 20 metres away. We realised we would not be doing any further learning that day.

Arranging group study meets was often a logistical challenge and my fieldnotes are filled with accounts of attempts to convene meetings, with one or more participants unable to attend. This was due to issues ranging from a lack of transport to participants needing to return to the *foho* ('countryside' in Tetum) to attend traditional ceremonies or assist in resolving family emergencies. Female participants who attended the English Conversation Club were often unable to attend due to a male family member or friend escort not being available to return with them after

dark, and security for women alone in Dili after sunset remains a central concern for these people and their families.

In one of the study groups established for teachers at LELI school, explored in Chapter 7, of the six weekly study group meetings organised to coincide with the weeks of the MOOC, at least one participant missed each session, usually due to the busy teaching schedule and high demand for their services. One participant became ill soon after the first group meeting and school staff were contacted to see if anyone with the same blood type could make an urgent donation. The teacher died suddenly less that 10 days after first being admitted to hospital and the paper that comprises that chapter is dedicated to her.

Gaining access to certain professional groups in Dili to gauge interest in online CPD training proved challenging on a number of occasions. One clear example was in healthcare settings, where a number of *malae* 'gatekeepers' disagreed with the idea of blending open online resources with study groups. One Australian surgeon of long standing in Dili explained that medical training was a 'master-apprentice' relationship and could not be done online under any circumstances. This is despite the wealth of open online medical training available. For example, another Australian surgeon friend based in Dili enthusiastically showed me a range of YouTube channels dedicated to sharing new surgical procedures.

Other opposition came from authorities with a more traditional training mindset, who determined that online learning was not and never could be of the same standard of training as face-to-face provision. Some education leaders I spoke to had direct experience of substandard online training, delivered as long video lecture recordings in English, offering no meaningful ways of actively applying new knowledge. It is undeniable that there is a great deal of poor-quality online learning available globally, made worse by the rush to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020; Pegrum et al., 2022), and this can colour perceptions of the efficacy of online learning.

Elsewhere, in the central Dili medical clinic where I met the research participant Ines (see Chapter 8), the Australian doctor administering the training

program explained that he was keen to provide online Continuing Professional Development (CPD), evidenced by the course Ines was taking, but was having difficulty. Many of the Timorese doctors, including those trained under scholarships in Cuba, needed further training to be able to make a timely diagnosis when triaging incoming patients. I observed one face-to-face training session and noticed that the doctors were taking some time to process new concepts and did not take many notes. I realised that each time the trainer asked a concept checking question in English, they needed to mentally translate the concept into Spanish (the language of instruction in Cuba) then consider the correct answer to translate back into English. This required considerable cognitive load from the Timorese doctors, working in what were at least their fourth and fifth languages, and as a result the classes generally progressed slowly.

Other stakeholders expressed broader concerns around the internet, the quality and relevance of learning materials to a Timorese context, and reservations about the internet generally. Three project interviewees noted the widespread accessing of pornography in Timor-Leste, while others pointed out the perceived timewasting involved in the country's growing uptake of social media, particularly Facebook. In the first weeks of my third field visit I set up a Facebook group for Timorese students to share educational resources, and one of the first things posted by a group member was a link to a pornographic video. Approximately one third of Timor-Leste's population is on Facebook (Hollis, 2018) – a figure which has almost certainly increased in recent years. One participant pointed out that to many Timorese, Facebook *is* the internet, and the extent of their engagement with it. While the uses and utility of social media present a challenge in Timor-Leste, one participant described a Facebook page he created for the purpose of developing a written language for his mother tongue, Nueti, spoken by people from around Viqueque district in the central South of the country. He explained that group members came to agreement by consensus on spelling and phonetic construction, as a way to help preserve the language, demonstrating one of the more constructive educational applications of social media.

As discussed in section 4.3 above, the issue of decolonising research methods remains a major challenge when conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Timor-Leste. Coincidentally, a recent paper concerning decolonizing research methods training through an online course cites chapters from this thesis (Tamimi et al., 2021). It is possible that open online education might serve as one way of democratising and decolonising qualitative research, helping researchers in both the global North and South to create and share new knowledge, underpinned by what Tuhiwai-Smith (2008, p.20) describes as "a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices."

4.8 Conclusion

Delamont (2011) observes that ethnographic research is "hard work: physically, emotionally and mentally exhausting" (p.11). In spite of the challenges, this research provided a valuable opportunity to work with, observe and interview participants in classrooms and less formal educational settings. These interactions lent important insights into participants' experience of education generally, and open online education more specifically. It allowed me to observe first-hand participants navigating the complexities of the Timorese eduscape, often looking to transition to international education via scholarships, negotiating these processes in seeking to improve their lives through educational opportunity.

In sum, the periods of fieldwork in Dili were challenging but personally educational, productive and immensely enjoyable. Apart from presenting an opportunity to return to a country I have a deep interest in, the chance to use ethnographic methods to investigate local educational practices and the potential for educational transformation through open online learning was an incredibly rewarding experience, providing a wealth of data from which to construct new knowledge on an under-researched field. As Wilson (2008) puts it, "if research hasn't changed you as a person, then you haven't done it right" (p.135), and the privilege of spending time with Timorese participants, and coming to a clearer understanding of the educational challenges they face, has changed me as a researcher and a person.

This chapter concludes the first section of the thesis. The second section comprises five chapters, consisting of four published journal articles and one conference paper. The next chapter is a systematic review of the literature on MOOCs and OERs in the global South and as such could have sat in the first section as background to the project, or the section of published work. For simplicity, the published chapters have been grouped into one section.

PART 2

Chapter 5. MOOCs and OERs in the global South: Problems and potential

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Abstract

This paper examines the problems and potential of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Education Resources (OERs) in the global South. Employing a systematic review of the research into the use of open online learning technologies in Southern contexts, we identify five interrelated themes emerging from the literature: 1. access to the internet; 2. participant literacies; 3. online pedagogies; 4. the context of content; and 5. the flow of knowledge between North and South. The significance of Southern voice and participation is addressed in the final section, which concludes that on balance the literature offers a qualified endorsement of the potential and actualities of MOOCs and OERs in the global South. The ongoing tendency for the research literature to pay little heed to the agency of the social actors with the most to gain from these innovations is noted, opening up space for further research into the lived experience of online learners in the global South.

5.1 Introduction

The post-2015 global educational development agenda, outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, is to "[e]nsure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning" (UNDP, 2015). A 2014 UNESCO report on the Education for All (EFA) goals states that "[f]lexible lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities should be provided through formal, non-formal and informal pathways, including by harnessing the potential of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) to create a new culture of learning" (UNESCO, 2014a, p.4). Questions arise as to whether a 'culture of learning' can be fostered in the global South using Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Education Resources

(OERs). In seeking to articulate the actual and possible opportunities MOOCs and OERs can provide in Southern contexts, we pose two research questions:

- What are the key problems restricting the uses of MOOCs and OERs for learners in the global South?
- What potential exists for MOOCs and OERs to provide educational opportunities for these learners?

5.2 MOOCs, OERs and the global South

MOOCs exploded into public consciousness in 2012 (Billsberry, 2013) and have come to dominate much of the recent discourse on online learning. Industry leaders such as (Koller, 2012) and (Agarwal, 2014) highlighted the potential for learners in the global South to benefit from MOOCs offered by prestigious universities in the North, but critics have dismissed these claims as being variously exaggerated (Daniel, 2012), impractical (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013), absurd (Sharma, 2013), and neocolonial (Altbach, 2014). MOOCs have quickly evolved into a number of forms with various taxonomies proposed. For example, connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) are open-access and use web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis to share user-generated content producing open-ended outcomes for the participants (McAuley et al., 2010). Platforms such as P2PU and Canvas Network exhibit cMOOC principles, creating open learning communities. Extended MOOCs (xMOOCs), made famous by Coursera and EdX, typically contain short videos, automated quizzes, peer-marked assessments, and online discussion forums. Their platforms allow course providers to use learning analytics to track participants' online activities with potential benefit for both course producers and consumers, but with problematic ethical implications (boyd & Crawford, 2012).

OERs are defined as "digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and re-use for teaching, learning and research" (Hylén & Schuller, 2007, p.3). Examples of OER producers include the Khan Academy and Open Courseware (OCW) from the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology (MIT), offering open online access to course content. Some authors include MOOCs under the OER umbrella (Rhoads et al., 2013); others believe MOOCs to be a progressive step in the evolution of OERs (Boga & McGreal, 2014).

The global South is a term encompassing older designations such as 'Third World' and 'developing countries'. Drawing on the work of Raewyn Connell and others, global South refers to "regions outside Europe and North America that are mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized" (Dados & Connell, 2012, p.12). In this review, the global South includes the countries of Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, but excludes Australia and New Zealand.

5.3 Methodology

Academic research on MOOCs and OERS in Southern contexts was sourced by conducting searches of Scopus, Web of Science, the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and Google Scholar databases in February 2017, using the terms "MOOCs" OR "OERs" AND ("global South" OR "developing countries" OR "developing world" OR "LDCs" [a term often used by the UN denoting Least Developed Countries] OR "low and middle income countries" OR "third world" [a term with limited contemporary currency]). Scopus returned 34 citations, Web of Science 15, and ERIC 18. Google Scholar returned over 8000 citations, reflecting the breadth of its search range, and the first 120 citations were included before the results had minimal relevance.

Of this total of 187 citations, 38 were excluded as duplications, 36 were excluded due to their non-academic or 'gray' nature, including blogs and blog posts, unreferenced newsletter posts, abstracts, speech transcripts, slides, and letters to journal editors. A further 18 citations were excluded for their limited relevance to the review topic, leaving 95 citations as the basis of this review.

The sources were coded according to the problems and potential for MOOCs and OERs in Southern contexts and five major themes emerged:

1. Access to the internet;
2. participant literacies;
3. online pedagogies;
4. the context of content; and
5. the flow of knowledge between North and South.

These themes frame the results of the review below.

5.4 Results

1. Access to the internet

An obvious barrier to open online learning is the ability of learners in the global South to access the internet, particularly due to infrastructure limitations (Chadaj et al., 2014; Christensen & Alcorn, 2014; Godwin-Jones, 2014; Literat, 2015; Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016; Wang & Jong, 2016; L. Wilson & Gruzd, 2014). Examples of internet access issues inhibiting MOOC and OER uptake are cited in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Hatakka, 2009), Cuba, Guatemala and Peru (Jurado et al., 2011), Egypt (Aboshady et al., 2015), India (Chatterjee & Nath, 2014; Perryman & Seal, 2016), Liberia (Madaio et al., 2016), Mexico and Thailand (Yáñez et al., 2014), Nigeria (Omonhinmin et al., 2015), Rwanda (Nkuyubwatsi, 2013), and Tanzania (Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014).

Learners in rural areas are often underrepresented in MOOC participation figures in Southern countries (Alcorn et al., 2015; Christensen et al., 2013; S. Quinn & Robinson, 2015) and access can be restricted by factors such as intermittent power supply and limited transport to locations with computers (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013). The same authors also report a clear gender divide, with women often facing

structural, gendered, ‘offline’ barriers to access (Perryman & de Los Arcos, 2016). People living with disabilities in the global South also face considerable accessibility barriers (Altimay et al., 2016).

Another key access barrier is the large amount of data required to download learning content (Daniel et al., 2015; Larson & Murray, 2008; Nkuyubwatsi, 2013). Most MOOC and OER sites require a bandwidth far higher than that available to many Southern learners, and the gap is growing (Escher et al., 2014; Haßler & Jackson, 2009). Southern learners may have difficulty using online collaborative tools within courses (Warusavitarana et al., 2014). Arslan, Bagchi, and Ryu (2015) find a positive correlation between regional bandwidth strength and MOOC certification numbers.

Local learning hubs (Escher et al., 2014; Godwin-Jones, 2014) or access hubs (Oyo & Kalema, 2014) provide physical spaces with internet-connected computers for learners to access online resources. Other ways of improving access include the use of low-resolution video content (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013), audio files and transcripts (Haßler & Jackson, 2009; Richter & McPherson, 2012), promoting off-peak bandwidth usage (Daniel & West, 2006), leveraging cloud-based technology (Jobe, 2013; Nabil, 2013), and making resources downloadable for use offline (Daniel et al., 2015), via Universal Serial Bus devices (USBs) (Jurado et al., 2011).

For many in the global South, the growth of mobile ICTs for learning (mobile learning, or m-learning) can significantly increase access (Castillo et al., 2015; Godwin-Jones, 2014; Ibáñez & Traxler, 2016; Wildavsky, 2014; Yáñez et al., 2014). Examples include:

- the New Economy Skills for Africa Program- ICT (NESAP- ICT) in Tanzania, which uses m-learning in combination with MOOC content to teach IT skills (Boga & McGreal, 2014); and
- the SocialEDU program in Rwanda, which uses a MOOC platform with mobile-compatible content (Wildavsky, 2015), with integrated social media allowing easier access to MOOC discussions (Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016).

Analysis of the backgrounds of Coursera MOOC participants (Christensen et al., 2013) reveals that 14.8% are from Brazil, Russia, India, China or South Africa (BRICS) and 19.9% from other developing countries. MOOC completers are already university-educated, revealing a widening educational divide between the global North and South, and also within Southern countries (Yáñez et al., 2014). More recent research reveals higher completion rates among participants from Southern countries (Garrido, Koepke, Andersen, Mena, et al., 2016) although this is disputed (Kizilcec et al., 2017). Reach does not always equal accessibility (Nti, 2015), and many learners in the global South still struggle to utilise the necessary ICTs via a regular, stable internet connection.

2. Participant Literacies

Learners need a range of literacies to benefit from MOOCs and OERs, particularly in countries with an underdeveloped education system (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013; L. Wilson & Gruzd, 2014). Resources in English can help learners looking to improve their English language proficiency (Ally & Samaka, 2013). Conversely, English-only content marginalises speakers of other languages (Oates, 2009; Sapargarliyev, 2015) and Southern learners may have difficulty understanding different accents and dialects, as well as technical and academic vocabulary (Nti, 2015).

A language audit of MOOCs created between 2012 and 2015 estimated that 75% of MOOCs are produced in English, however there is evidence of growing diversity (Stratton & Grace, 2016). MOOCs are now presented in Arabic (Adham & Lundqvist, 2015; Castillo et al., 2015), Chinese (Godwin-Jones, 2014; T. R. Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2014), and Spanish throughout Latin America (Valentin, 2015), in addition to courses in less common local languages (Varghese, 2016). Crowd-sourced translation, such as Coursera's Global Translator Community (GTC), has broadened MOOCs' international reach (Daniel et al., 2015; Godwin-Jones, 2014), and OER repositories such as Temoa provide a range of resources in multiple languages (Gómez-Zermeño & Alemán Lorena de la Garza, 2015).

Many Southern learners need basic computer literacies to use a keyboard, screen and mouse (Daniel et al., 2015), particularly those living with disabilities (Altimay et al., 2016), and participants need skills to use the online tools required (J. C. Chen, 2013; Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013; Warusavitarana et al., 2014). Mobile ICTs have the advantage of being familiar to many users, without learners needing to understand the workings of a desktop computer (Boga & McGreal, 2014), but resources such as cMOOCs require participants to interact across different digital spaces (Literat, 2015) while managing large amounts of information (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2015). Preparatory MOOCs (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013) or face-to-face workshops for OER users (Hu et al., 2015) could aid literacy development.

3. Online pedagogies

The pedagogical foundations of MOOCs and OERs are central to their success in providing quality learning opportunities. Many MOOC formats may simply repackage old, didactic pedagogies (Chadaj et al., 2014; Onah et al., 2014), and 'freemium' xMOOC models, where basic content is free but premium features cost extra, can result in sub-optimal experiences for Southern learners (Kalman, 2014). Observers have noted a shift from teacher- to learner-centred pedagogy in OERs (Kanwar et al., 2010), while some suggest that MOOCs need to encourage more problem-based (Ally & Samaka, 2013; Maitland & Obeysekare, 2015) and project-based learning (Nkuyubwatsi, 2014). These approaches can sometimes be met with resistance (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2015) and, participants may not trust new, unfamiliar online learning platforms (Garrido et al., 2016) or be wary of commenting on course forums (Kizilcec et al., 2017; Onah et al., 2014).

The use of blended learning models, combining online resources with face-to-face interaction, is one means of maximising the educational potential of MOOCs (Cutrell et al., 2015; dela Pena Bandalaria & Javier Alonso, 2015; Madaio et al., 2016; Wildavsky, 2015) and OERs (Larson & Murray, 2008; Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014) in the global South. Nkuyubwatsi (2014) identifies benefits in local collaborative study

groups, and the 'meetup' function on some MOOC platforms encourages learner interaction offline (Bulger, Bright, & Cobo, 2015). 'MOOC camps' run by the US State Department help learner groups to access courses while being mentored by English-speaking embassy staff (Godwin-Jones, 2014; Maitland & Obeysekare, 2015; Wildavsky, 2014), similar to the MOOC+ model of peer-supported learning (Adams et al., 2013).

Issues of certification and accreditation are closely linked to the pedagogy of open online content (Yáñez et al., 2014). A comparative study found that Kenyan students valued a MOOC credential more highly than their Swedish colleagues (Jobe, 2014), while participants in Colombia, the Philippines and South Africa see MOOCs as a path to professional certification (Garrido et al., 2016). Without accreditation, Southern learners will be unable to convert MOOC learning into improved employment prospects (Castillo et al., 2015).

Some argue that the MOOC model needs to be re-engineered if it is to provide a cost-effective means of educating a large and growing Southern learner cohort (Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016; Wildavsky, 2015). Research into OERs embedded within MOOC architecture include:

- open source, mobile ICT-compatible MOOC platforms using OER content to provide greater opportunities for Southern learners (Boga & McGreal, 2014);
- the Creative Higher Education with Learning Object (partially abbreviated to CHiLO) in a mobile open learning environment designed for limited bandwidth access (Hori et al., 2015); and
- a proposed Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)- MOOC for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for language teachers (Ibáñez & Traxler, 2016).

OERs can be reused within different contexts (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013), which has cost benefits for Southern resource producers (Mulligan, 2016); however, the initial expense of OER production can lead Southern countries to become net consumers of such resources (Leeds, 2013).

MOOCs and OERs in Southern contexts have been designed or are proposed in agriculture (Hassen, 2013) computer science (Boga & McGreal, 2014), disaster management (William et al., 2013), financial literacy (Siddike & Kohda, 2016), healthcare (de Ruijter et al., 2008; Liyanagunawardena & Aboshady, 2017), library and information systems (LIS) (Pujar & Bansode, 2014; Pujar & Tadasad, 2016), medicine (Aboshady et al., 2015; Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2014), and teacher training (Fyle, 2013). More research is needed into what pedagogical approaches work best across different disciplines in Southern contexts.

4. Context of Content

Contextualizing MOOC and OER content to local conditions is another important issue addressed in the literature. Local consultation is important when designing OERs (Kanwar et al., 2010) and the use of generic resources can lead to higher dropout rates (Richter & McPherson, 2012). Critics argue that MOOCs are designed for consumption, not for adaptation, (Czerniewicz et al., 2014) and more consideration of local conditions and needs would benefit Southern learners (Castillo et al., 2015; Daniel et al., 2015; Nkuyubwatsi, 2014).

Cultural differences among learners should be an important consideration for MOOCs producers (J. C. Chen, 2013; Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013), and critics claim much existing content is inappropriate outside the global North (Wildavsky, 2014, 2015). A study of cultural translation in five Coursera MOOCs found that course content could be contextualized in two of the five courses, and discussion forums in all of the courses provided opportunities for learners to relate content to a personal context (Nkuyubwatsi, 2014), a central element of good course design (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2015).

Richter and McPherson (2012) present an OER adaptation model, and resources have been successfully remixed in the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) programme (Connolly et al., 2007), and in a South African university (Mallinson & Krull, 2015). A MOOC on the Ebola virus produced by MOOC platform

Alison to raise awareness in affected countries (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2015) demonstrates that these courses can target regional problems.

5. The flow of knowledge from North to South

The final theme to emerge from the literature concerns the North-South imbalances of knowledge flows in MOOCs and OERs. Critics argue that the predominantly Northern origin of MOOCs represents academic nationalism, limiting the development of local academic culture (Altbach, 2014), or neo-colonial paternalism (Godwin-Jones, 2014), which consolidates Northern hegemony (Czerniewicz et al., 2014), and threatens to create massive open educational homogeneity (Dumitrescu, 2015).

As key sites of learning and knowledge production, Southern higher education institutions (HEIs) need to lead the adaptation of existing MOOCs as well as the creation of new courses (Czerniewicz et al., 2014). (Cox & Trotter, 2016) discuss the challenges to OER adoption in South African universities, and highlight the importance of institutional culture in promoting or restricting OER production by academic staff. Barriers to MOOC and OER reuse in HEIs include copyright restrictions (Ncube, 2011) and open access to scholarly publications (Anderson, 2013). Inter-university cooperation fosters Open Educational Practices (OEPs), which includes sharing OER and MOOC content (Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016). North-South knowledge partnerships have been developed between Malaysia and Australia (Valentin, 2015), and are proposed in Papua New Guinea (Woruba & Abedin, 2015) and throughout Africa (Escher et al., 2014).

There are promising signs in the growth of OER production by some Southern countries (Venkatamaran & Kanwar, 2015). The Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) produces OERs and supports other Southern universities to do the same (Daniel et al., 2009). The University of the South Pacific's MOOC on climate change (Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016) and the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) MOOCs (dela Pena Bandalaria & Javier Alonso, 2015) demonstrate the potential for course production in Southern countries.

There has been some caution around the wholesale adoption of OERs within African HEIs due to further concerns of Northern academic elitism (Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014) and issues of access, required literacies and cultural barriers (Woldegiyorgis & Carvalho, 2015). A survey of Chinese university students found almost 80% had accessed some form of OERs in the course of their study (Hu et al., 2015), although production is limited to a small number of institutions (Xu et al., 2014). Projects incorporating locally produced or reused MOOCs and OERs into university courses have been successfully instituted in India (Chatterjee & Nath, 2014, 2015; Kamat et al., 2013; Nath & Karmakar, 2014; Perryman et al., 2014) and Pakistan (Abidi et al., 2016; Pasha et al., 2016). A Nigerian university has invested in online learning platforms using OCW from MIT (Omonhinmin et al., 2015), and a Value Focused Thinking model has been proposed for Caribbean HEIs to guide strategic MOOC adoption (Barclay & Logan, 2013).

5.5 Discussion

Despite the numerous interacting structural barriers to MOOC and OER uptake detailed above, there is evidence to suggest that participation in open online learning is possible. MOOCs have demonstrated their capacity to work to scale in Southern contexts (Laurillard & Kennedy, 2017) and both MOOCs and OERs are helping countries progress toward SDG 4 (McGreal, 2017). The fact that some MOOCs and OERs have been successfully tested in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and China, suggests that qualified endorsement is warranted. However, the literature also reveals problems previously identified in the discourse of participation in development.

> One of the recurring themes within the participation literature is the use of the term 'top-down' both to criticise development initiatives and to explain their failure. It occurs time and again, in different epochs, reinforcing key ideals on which participation advocates depend (Cornwall 2006, p 71).

We raise Cornwall's ideas about participation, based upon interrogation of development policy discourse regarding measures aimed at improving the lives of 'the

poor' over much of the 20th century, to highlight two notable and closely related problems in the literature reviewed here. The first is the unreflexive focus on MOOCs and OERs as either an obvious 'public good' or as yet another ill-thought through imposition upon peoples of the global South. This focus at best misses its targets, or at worst contributes to the ongoing reproduction of existing inequalities on global, regional and national scales.

The second problem flows directly from the functionalist/criticalist dichotomy just highlighted in that the literature reflects an almost exclusive focus on the top-down, structural elements of MOOCs and OERs. Given that the inter-woven relationship between social structures and human agency is well established as a sociological orthodoxy (Sayer, 1990), this sort of structural myopia is surprising. A number of authors argue that insufficient attention is paid to the desires, aspirations and practices of those from the global South who are potential and/or actual participants in these online learning opportunities (Daniel et al., 2015; Garrido et al., 2016; Nti, 2015; Rhoads et al., 2013).

Cornwall's focus on the history of the idea of participation as continuing an unfulfilled trope of development policymakers serves to highlight, in her words, "the contingency of the normative ideals on which discourses of participation depend, which even the most trenchant of critics have left untouched" (Cornwall, 2006). In turn, this analysis serves to focus our attention on the ways in which development discourse all too often construes new developments as interventions imposed upon a lumpen mass of people at the end of a development pipeline. Even if construed as being ready to adopt the technologies of change, the potential and/or actual participants and consumers of MOOCs and OERs are rarely brought into the picture. Exceptions include autoethnographic studies of MOOC participation (Liyanagunawardena, 2013; Nkuyubwatsi, 2013; Warusavitarana et al., 2014), and a study of archetypal Southern 'learner personas' (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2015), but a focus on the structural barriers to open online learning dominates the literature, to the exclusion of explorations of Southern learners as social agents.

What becomes clear from a systematic review of the literature is that more research is needed into the lived experiences of MOOC and OER users and potential users in the global South. This would help create insights into how they access and negotiate online learning environments within various structural constraints. Further, while the attempts of Northern countries to assist the South in improving education are laudable, more needs to be done to support Southern educators to create their own online resources in appropriate languages.

5.6 Conclusion

The key themes emerging from the research– access to the internet; participant literacies; online pedagogies; the context of content; and the flow of knowledge between North and South– represent major barriers to MOOC and OER uptake in the global South. Despite the structural impediments, these forms of online learning have potential to meet at least some of the growing demand for education in the 21st century. Prominent among developments in assisting the spread of open online learning is the rapid increase in mobile ICT use worldwide, opportunities for blended learning, and MOOC models which incorporate OER content.

What is less well known is how individual Southern learners negotiate these barriers to learning online, and the literature is poorer for it. At present, much of the research reproduces 20th century top-down development thinking in the global North. The existing dominant mode of MOOC and OER production therefore needs rethinking, and Southern voices, those of both learners and educators need to be heard. With further research into Southern learner and educator experiences, MOOCs and OERs could create more learning opportunities which harness the educational potential of ICTs and the internet.

Chapter 6. Doing MOOCs in Dili: Studying online learner behaviour in the global South

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Abstract

This paper is part of an ethnographic action research project investigating the potential for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to provide learning opportunities to students in Dili, Timor-Leste. A systematic review of academic literature on MOOCs and Open Educational Resources (OERs) in the global South (M. King, Pegrum, et al., 2018) identified key emergent themes: The infrastructural barriers to internet access; the literacies required to participate in online learning; the new, often unfamiliar pedagogical approaches; and the context of content. This paper examines these themes in Dili as they play out in practice. A fifth theme in the literature is also discussed; the imbalance of knowledge flow from global North to South, leading to accusations of academic neocolonialism. This paper proposes that qualitative learner behaviour research is crucial to understanding how online learners in places like Dili negotiate the conditions which constrain and enable learning in MOOCs, and concludes that MOOC platforms need to acknowledge postcolonial critiques and give greater voice to academics in the global South.

6.1 Introduction

Since MOOCs first appeared in the higher education landscape, they have been touted as a means of providing quality education at scale to a global audience, including learners in the global South, broadly defined as “regions outside Europe and North America that are mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally

marginalized" (Dados & Connell, 2012, p.12). Claims of MOOCs being a panacea to global inequalities are naïve in the extreme. A recent systematic review of the literature on MOOCs and Open Educational Resources in the global South (M. King, Pegrum, et al., 2018) revealed five emergent themes: The infrastructural barriers to internet access; the literacies required to participate in online learning; the new, often unfamiliar pedagogical approaches adopted; the context of content; and the imbalance of knowledge flow from the global North to the South. This paper situates these themes in the context of field data collected in Dili Timor-Leste, to examine how they manifest in and influence learner behaviour and practice.

The author conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, interviewing over 100 university students, academics and other higher education stakeholders, facilitating 5 MOOCs as a form of blended learning with face-to-face study group meetings with Timorese learners, holding drop in sessions introducing MOOCs with approximately 50 students, and 'hanging out' on higher education campuses, notably the Universidad Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) and Wi-Fi 'hotspots' dotted around the city. This data was collected, interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded, then grouped and related to the themes identified in the literature.

6.2 Results

Access to the internet

The first and perhaps most obvious barriers to individuals in the global South learning through MOOCs is the ability to access a stable internet connection using information and communication technologies (ICTs) that are affordable for the learner. This is particularly true for women (Perryman & de Los Arcos, 2016), those living in rural areas (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013) and people living with disability (Altimay et al., 2016). The literature on learning with mobile ICTs (M-learning) is burgeoning (Traxler, 2018) and mobile access to MOOCs and OER is becoming a key element of efforts to

meet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, quality education (McGreal, 2017).

In Dili, internet access has been significantly improved by the liberalization of the telecommunications industry in 2012, which has introduced two new telcos to the market. internet enabled mobile ICTs and cheap laptops, often purchased across the border in Indonesia, are now common sights across university campuses and in Wi-Fi 'hotspots' around Dili where people can prepay internet access starting at USD 0.06c for 15 minutes. Sites such as the Timor Plaza shopping mall offer free Wi-Fi, however the limited strength of the connection combined with the number of young people online means accessing MOOC content such as videos proved impossible. In travelling around Dili, I saw on a number of occasions, groups of young people on various mobile ICTs stationed near the boundary fences of office buildings, looking to gain free access the Wi-Fi. UNTL had at least two internet hubs, one sponsored by the Australian government, the other by the United States. These centres offered desktop computers with access to offline educational programs, usually related to English for academic study. Online access is restricted to 30–60-minute sessions and connectivity was generally intermittent at best; students could spend their entire session unsuccessfully trying to load a course page. Some learners were able to join MOOCs, but the time limits on completion of free courses often prevented learners finishing courses before their access expired.

LITERACIES

If people are able to access a reliable internet connection, there are various interrelated literacies they need to be able to comprehend and engage with course content. The language literacy required to understand courses is key, especially English, given its dominance as the language of MOOC instruction (Stratton & Grace, 2016). The digital literacies required to use ICTs to study MOOCs are also crucial, starting with the basics of using a mouse and keyboard, although mobile ICT access allows Southern learners access on more familiar devices (Boga & McGreal, 2014). The critical literacy required for learners to engage with and question course content is also important, and these combine into what Pegrum (2014) describes as 'critical

mobile literacy', which includes learners' deeper understanding of both the positive and negative impacts of ICTs.

Working with Timorese people participating in MOOCs revealed the plurilingual nature of Timorese language literacy. In a learning activity on a FutureLearn course, learners were asked to construct a sociogram representing the languages they spoke and the social, family and work groups with whom they used those languages. The Timorese participants all produced complex diagrams showing the diversity of languages, including the national languages Tetum and Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia, endogenous languages such as Makassae, Fatuluku, Mambae and Kemak, as well as English. The participants perform various 'roles' in these languages depending on their context of use, and English is a primary language for the role of higher education, particularly for those looking to apply for international scholarships.

Observing students in internet hubs on the campus of UNTL, it was clear participants were often tentative and cautious in their manipulation of the mouse and keyboard, as if they were afraid to break the equipment. Learners on mobiles were much more confident, and some preferred to use a desktop to watch and read MOOC content, then use mobile device to post comments within courses. The challenges of helping Timorese learners develop critical literacies are exemplified in the prevalence of 'copy paste' culture in higher education, where students will plagiarise online content in assignments, relying on 'Mr Google' as participants jokingly described it. This issue is certainly not limited to Timor-Leste, and MOOCs can play a role in fostering critical and mobile literacy development.

Pedagogies

The new, unfamiliar pedagogical approaches of MOOCs raise questions about how effectively Southern learners engage with courses, although critics also point out that courses can reproduce didactic, passive learning experiences (Onah et al., 2014). The onus on self-directed learning assumes learners are able to take this journey independently, which is not always the case for learners in the global South (Knox, 2016b). A growing body of research indicates clear value in convening MOOC study

groups, variously described as 'MOOC camps' (Maitland & Obeysekare, 2015), 'wrapped MOOCs' (Jaffer et al., 2017) or 'MOOC+' (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2015) where online content is blended with face-to-face discussion. This allows both scaffolded peer learning and an opportunity to consolidate ideas presented through courses.

Timorese MOOC participants often needed time to understand how to navigate the various steps in a course learning journey such as pressing the 'mark as complete' button on FutureLearn course steps, or following the navigation bar of edX courses. They were also often reticent to comment on course discussion feeds because of concerns about giving incorrect answers or not having a high level of accuracy in their answers, linking back to the importance of language literacies. While some preferred not to post comments, many described the value they perceived in reading other learners' comments and looking for new ideas, especially in courses for teacher professional development. The experience of blending course content with face-to-face meetings in this project created opportunities for learners to ask questions among their peers, concept check and gain a better understanding of key concepts by talking them through with others.

CONTEXT OF CONTENT

MOOCs on topics designed for a Northern audience can often lack relevance for learners in the global South (Wildavsky, 2014). A number of authors point to the need for course resources to be tailored to local conditions (Castillo et al., 2015), which can work counter to the scalar aims of MOOCs, promising global reach. There are a growing number of courses on various platforms aimed at Southern audiences. At FutureLearn, courses designed for these learner audiences include the Open University's collaboration with Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) *Making Teacher Education Relevant for 21st Century Africa*, the University of Cape Town's *Education for All: Disability, Diversity and Inclusion* and The British Society for Antimicrobial Stewardship (BSAC)'s collaboration with the University of Lagos on *Antimicrobial Stewardship for Africa*.

Currently there are no MOOCs produced either in or for Timor-Leste and learners need to adapt content to their personal context. This was a key part of study group meetings and learners were able to use dialogue with peers to think actively about how knowledge applied to them, which was not always possible and lead to some course attrition as learners felt the content was irrelevant to them. The question: 'So, how does this work in Timor-Leste?' was a regular refrain within group discussions, and further added to the value of face-to-face discussions.

North-South knowledge flow

The final theme to emerge from the academic research into MOOCs in the global South concerns the dominance of Northern higher education institutions in the production and dissemination of knowledge, leading to accusations of academic neo-colonialism and the marginalization of Southern academic voices (Altbach, 2014). Many learners in the global South choose to do MOOCs because they are produced in these global centres of academic power and are drawn by institutional reputation (Traxler, 2018). The issue of knowledge, power and the colonial legacy is one that MOOC platforms need to address in the light of these clear imbalances.

Timor-Leste has a wealth of knowledge exemplified by its traditional customary practices, linguistic diversity, terrestrial and marine biodiversity and a turbulent history of occupation by first the Portuguese empire and more recently Indonesia. A course, for example, based on the report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR, 2013), would be one way of presenting Timor-Leste's history for online learners around the world to know more about this country and its past.

6.3 Conclusion

The periods of fieldwork in Dili have provided an invaluable opportunity to gain rich insights into how learners in Timor-Leste interact with online learning, particularly the barriers which constrain learner behaviour and the ways in which learners negotiate these barriers with varying levels of success. Qualitative learner behaviour research such as ethnography provides a rich source of data to see beyond learner statistics and look more closely at the lived experience of learners, in order to better understand their educational needs. Further, MOOC platforms need to acknowledge postcolonial critiques and give academics in the global South a voice, providing opportunities for learners with limited internet access, in languages they understand, using pedagogical approaches they can relate to on topics that matter to them. There is tremendous scope for more diversity of academic voices in courses, for the empire to 'MOOC back' at the global metropole.

Chapter 7. Experiences of Timorese language teachers in a blended Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

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Abstract

This paper details the experiences of a group of Timorese English language teachers from Lorosa'e English Language Institute (LELI) in Dili, Timor-Leste, who participated in a professional development MOOC entitled *Teaching for Success: Lessons and Teaching* between March and April 2017. Drawing on the pedagogical principles of blended learning; participants engaged with online course content, and once a week met as a study group to view some video content together and discuss issues arising from it. The authors draw on participant observation, individual and focus group interviews and post-course author reflections to outline the benefits and challenges of doing blended MOOCs in Dili, and propose that they can provide local English language teachers opportunities for subject area knowledge building, language literacy development and more general lifelong learning.

7.1 Introduction

This paper is part of a participatory action research project investigating the potential for MOOCs and Open Education Resources (OERs) to provide low-cost, quality learning experiences for learners in Timor-Leste. MOOCs have been proposed as a 'game changer' for higher education in the global South (Warusavitarana et al., 2014). Critics point to the neo-colonial potential of MOOCs from the global North supplanting Southern higher education (Altbach, 2014; Godwin-Jones, 2014; Head, 2015) and the lack of contextualised content (Czerniewicz et al., 2014; Nkuyubwatsi, 2014). Key barriers to uptake in countries of the global South include limited access to the

internet and the requisite information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as low participant literacies (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013). Despite these limitations, recent reports conclude that MOOCs can provide scalar opportunities for higher education in the global South (Laurillard & Kennedy, 2017), and help progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4; quality education (McGreal, 2017).

Research suggests that there are benefits to group learning within MOOCs (Bayeck, 2016). Facilitated MOOCs, known as 'MOOC+' (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2015), 'MOOC camps' (Maitland & Obeysekare, 2015) or 'wrapped' MOOCs (Jaffer et al., 2017) can leverage the affordances of blending MOOC resources with face-to-face learning via co-located viewing of course content (Li et al., 2014), tutorial-style group discussions (Bulger et al., 2015), and the formation of local communities of practice (Firmansyah & Timmis, 2016). Maitland and Obeysekare (2015) argue that MOOC study groups allow participants to accumulate cultural and cultural capital in and through the facilitated MOOC experience.

MOOCs are a relatively new phenomenon in Timor-Leste and the lead author's earlier research into online learning participation in Dili (M. King, 2016) identified isolated examples of individuals and small groups of 'early adopters' taking advantage of online learning resources, including MOOCs. Studies elsewhere suggest that MOOCs can contribute to professional learning (Laurillard, 2016; Milligan & Littlejohn, 2014), including in teacher professional development in the global South (Batchelor & Lautenbach, 2015; Fyle, 2013). A report into the applications of MOOCs for professional development in Colombia, the Philippines and South Africa found that MOOCs provided quality training opportunities, and recommended they be incorporated into existing government workforce development programs (Garrido et al., 2016). The authors also identified a dearth of research into the lived experience of MOOC participants from countries of the global South (see also Nti, 2015) and this paper aims to make a contribution to this field.

7.2 Context

Monty King facilitated a British Council course on the FutureLearn MOOC platform entitled *Teaching for Success: Lessons and Teaching* for four weeks from March to April, 2017 and seven Timorese language teachers at LELI participated in the course. Participants accessed the resources– a combination of videos, articles, printable worksheets, short quizzes, surveys, and comments pages– for six weeks from the day they enrolled. LELI offered to subsidise the cost of a course 'upgrade', giving participants unlimited access to the course resources and a printed certificate. The course encouraged participants to reflect on their own teaching practice and adopt some of the strategies and approaches presented and modelled through the course in their teaching. Each Monday morning during the course, King downloaded the approximately 10-15 weekly videos and copied them to a USB file, then to the LELI shared staff computer, allowing participants to watch course content offline. Participants then worked through the course resources in their own time. The study group met for 1-2 hours each Thursday morning, watching 2-3 of that week's videos, unpacking more difficult language, and discussing the application of these ideas in the Timorese language classroom.

7.3 Method

The research drew on the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and used an ethnographic approach to data collection within a cycle of observation and informed reflection also known as Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) (Tacchi et al., 2003). King observed the teacher participants within weekly study groups and conducted individual interviews both before and after course completion in addition to a focus group interview at the completion of the course. The interviews were semi-structured and aimed at encouraging the social construction of knowledge among participants and researchers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In the pre-course interview, participants were asked about their education background, their use of the internet (particularly for educational purposes), and their future career ambitions. At the completion of the course, they were interviewed again and asked about their

impressions of the course and its utility. A focus group interview conducted upon completion of the course provided a forum for the participants to share their impressions and discuss the wider applications of MOOCs in Timor-Leste. The focus group interview was transcribed and analysed separately by the three authors, who then met and compared codes, identifying the main benefits and challenges to emerge from the data, and applying them to the entire data set.

The interviews were conducted entirely in English, and the participants had a level of conversational English that allowed a discussion of their educational background, experiences of using ICTs and the internet, and their career ambitions, without major difficulty. The second author, Bernadete Luan, who also participated in the courses, has a postgraduate qualification from an Australian university and the third author, Esperança Lopes, also a participant, studied a liberal arts degree at an American university. Three other participants had studied English language education at the national university and another was in the process of writing his Education honours thesis, in English, to complete his studies. The final participant had completed her secondary education and had participated in informal English language training programs in her hometown outside Dili until she had become a trainer, a common story to emerge from interviews with Timorese language teachers. Though all the participants currently reside in Dili, they came from municipalities across the country drawn by opportunities to study and work in the capital and largest city.

7.4 Results

Five major benefits and four challenges around facilitating MOOCs for CPD in Timor-Leste were identified in the data:

Benefit 1: Access to quality learning resources

There was general group consensus that the course resources were of excellent standard with valuable, relevant content. The short lecture videos in particular were well received. One participant commented "it was great because it [the video] contains a lot of new ideas… and I got a lot of ideas which empower my understanding about teaching." The materials constructively aligned with weekly module objectives, and the logic of the course progression fostered productive discussions throughout the course.

An early activity required participants to reflect on how they plan their lessons, and provided downloadable lesson plan templates for teacher use. This combined with the discussions, both online through the course comments pages and the face-to-face study group meetings, gave the teachers an "…opportunity to go a little bit deeper about how to prepare lesson plan." The resources were of a high quality, and the group were aware that the British Council is an industry leader in English language education through previous professional development training.

Benefit 2: Sharing and learning from others

The study group appreciated the opportunity to share reflections, opinions and insights from other group members, and other participants around the world. A number of teachers reported using the online comments pages as a resource to mine for teaching tips.

> We see teachers from different countries… post comments…you read some comments… it's learning from others…

Another participant added:

> I had a chance to talk to people from different countries, know about their experiences in teaching... sharing experiences.

These shared personal teaching experiences nurtured a collegial atmosphere through the course. The participants often recognised something familiar in the reflections of

teachers around the world and the challenges they face. This transferred to the group discussions, where participants were asked to identify their Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) and how they encourage reflective learning and professional development.

BENEFIT 3: ENCOURAGING REFLECTIVE LEARNING

The *Teaching for Success* courses promote reflective practice, and learners are regularly asked to consider how they can utilise the strategies introduced through the course to improve their teaching. One focus group member summed up this benefit in noting:

> [T]hey bring up a lot of issues that you are also thinking some teachers might have had that experience before... and then also we recognize what we are facing when we are teaching.

Collective reflection was encouraged, which compounded the benefits of group learning, both online and face-to-face. Reflective learning was new to some participants, and they took to it willingly, despite early reservations about sharing reflections with more senior teachers. For many it was an opportunity to consolidate previous training, and dedicate some time to consider their future professional development pathways. In all the reflective component of the course challenged the participants to think more deeply about their teaching practice, which they responded to positively.

BENEFIT 4: MOTIVATING TEACHERS TO TRY NEW THINGS AND DEVELOP THEIR TEACHING PRACTICE.

While many of the ideas presented through the course were familiar to the teachers, all of the teachers reported trying new ideas from the course in the classroom. One participant explained:

> [W]ith the videos… when you watch… when you see teachers teaching you think, OK maybe I did this, changing with this one into this one.

The teachers experimented with a number of the different ideas suggested through the course, including whiteboard management, use of flashcards and activities designed to engage students and keep the classroom student-centred. The course also introduced participants to the concept of the action research cycle and encouraged them to apply it in their work. Overall, the course challenged teachers to break old, repetitive teaching habits and try new approaches, which the participants found particularly useful.

Benefit 5: Improving participants' English

Many of the teachers felt that the course was a good opportunity to develop their own English language skills. The *Teaching for Success* course page indicated that participants would need an English level of B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). The study group members all demonstrated English at or above this level, and appreciated the opportunity to practice their English, particularly the language related to teaching:

> … [I]t's also like a time for us to learn some new words that, like you don't know about and then somebody else mentions about it… so we can know more about teaching, know more about what they experience… I think it's also something like improving our English.

This benefit echoes the principles of content-language integrated learning (CLIL), whereby students learn a language *of*, *for* and *through* a subject area (Coyle et al., 2010). Research into MOOCs for CLIL is nascent (de Waard & Demeulenaere, 2016) but appears an interesting direction for further research.

Challenge 1: Internet access

While internet connectivity has improved significantly in Timor-Leste over the past five years, it remains intermittent at best. LELI has a relatively reliable connection, but periods of slow net speeds and power blackouts were common. The weekly videos were downloaded in an effort to reduce the disruption caused by this issue, but this

process was often time-consuming. Participants expressed frustration but also demonstrated a stoic patience, knowing that this was unavoidable.

All of the participants had access to a smart phone and/or laptop, and some downloaded course materials to their personal devices to watch offline. One participant watched the lectures on her laptop offline, but contributed to the course discussions using her smart phone because it was more convenient. Another accessed almost all of the materials through his phone, while others preferred the larger screen and keyboard of a laptop. For some the idea of mobile learning seemed counterintuitive, while others took to it readily. A recent study of a MOOC on research writing for participants from the global South incorporated resources designed for low-bandwidth scenarios (Murugesan et al., 2017), which can help learners overcome these access barriers.

CHALLENGE 2: TIME MANAGEMENT

A very busy schedule at LELI meant that most teachers missed at least one of the study group sessions, but were able to access the videos in their own time and keep up with the course.

> I would love to do it by myself and also with a group as well, it depends with the teachers who have time. At the moment we have, how do you say, very high teaching hours.

Across the five weeks of the course most teachers regularly taught over 30 hours a week, not including preparation and marking time. Participants often copied the lectures to their portable devices to take home over weekends, and the two extra weeks available at the end of the course to finish off various steps was invaluable. Until late February 2017 FutureLearn courses were open indefinitely for participants to complete once they had enrolled, and this new deadline presents a greater challenge for participants in areas with limited internet access. Further, the everyday time commitments of family, religious and ceremonial commitments, all restrict participants' free time to complete the course. Time constraints have been cited as a

factor mitigating course completion in other countries of the global South (Garrido et al., 2016).

CHALLENGE 3: COURSE DESIGN ISSUES

While participants appreciated the clear layout of the course, some experienced difficulties using some areas of the platform. For example, one focus group member found it difficult to follow fellow participants' comments:

> …There are many people on the course put the comment there, and after it's very hard for us to follow them again because we have to scroll all the comments…

Another design issue identified was the perceived ease of course completion. There was a feeling that just by clicking the 'mark as complete' section on each course step you could gain a certificate while having learnt little:

> Anyone can participate in the course but then they can pay for a certificate even though they don't learn a lot… it's just like you pay for it get certificate, put in your CV.

A focus group member suggested that more formative assessments would encourage participant engagement. Other MOOCs offer automatically marked quizzes, as a means of concept checking participant understanding, and the use of this kind of tool would compel participants to engage with course content and assess learner progress.

CHALLENGE 4: LIMITED CERTIFICATION PAYMENT METHODS AND PROHIBITIVE COST

FutureLearn offers certification and unlimited access to course materials for a fee, and the *Teaching for Success* course cost approximately USD $75. Credit card ownership is limited to a privileged few in Timor-Leste and the national bank has only made such facilities available to its customers from July 2017. One participant with a credit card from an Indonesian bank tried to pay for certification, but was unsuccessful:

> …I tried to upgrade my course, I wanted to pay but they won't allow me to just because the bank that I'm using they don't work with the merchant for FutureLearn. So it's good that the

> FutureLearn they have many people that sign up for that from everywhere but maybe they can expand payment options.

LELI school offered to subsidise two thirds of the course certification fee so that participants paid USD $25 and the school met the balance. The school then made payment with a UK credit card and organised for the certificates to be posted to an address in the UK, then brought back to Timor-Leste. This was a time-consuming process, and without significant support from LELI school, certification would have been impossible. Of the seven participants, three opted to pay for certification. Two of those who decided not to pay explained that they were not able to because of financial constraints. One teacher felt uncomfortable asking the school to subsidise the cost and another, mentioned above, tried unsuccessfully to pay with their personal credit card.

7.5 Conclusion

The *Teaching for Success: Lessons and Teaching* course study group had at least three learning implications for participants. The first was the sharing of knowledge specific to the course subject area. The study groups allowed participants to clarify, discuss and apply ideas presented through the course and integrate them with previous professional development training. The course encouraged the teachers to take new ideas back to the language classroom in a cycle of planning, action and reflection, and stressed the importance of CPD to growing and improving as a teacher.

The course provided an opportunity to learn about the theory and practice of English language in English, using language specific to teaching theory. Participants often commented about being familiar with a particular idea without knowing the word for it in English. Applying the basic principles of CLIL in MOOC study groups encourages participants to learn the metalanguage around their profession, to help them engage with ideas which can inform and improve their teaching while improving their English language knowledge at the same time. This is not limited to teachers, nor to English language speakers; Timorese learners can use MOOCs as a means to

improve their skills in Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia, Korean, Chinese and other languages relevant to Timorese learners now used in various MOOC platforms.

Another benefit was the introduction of online learning more generally and the range of quality online CPD resources available to teachers. Some participants reported enrolling in other FutureLearn courses in the weeks after the completion of the *Teaching for Success* course. Some enrolled together with colleagues while others began exploring other MOOCs individually. Teachers reported using a number of websites for lesson ideas before the course, but none had previously been aware of online CPD courses. What remains clear from researching the uptake of MOOCs and other online learning resources in Timor-Leste is that public awareness of what is available online is still very low, an issue not limited to this country (Nath & Karmakar, 2014).

These benefits can only be gained if participants are able to access a reliable internet connection, a precondition not often met in countries of the global South, including Timor-Leste. The blending of online course content with face-to-face interactions was beneficial as a means of scaffolding the online learning experience, however it did limit the flexibility that MOOCs provide. The other challenges mentioned in the results combine to restrict the effectiveness of MOOCs for CPD in Southern contexts and demand a particular form of learner resilience to successfully negotiate these barriers to learning. There is, on balance, an advantage to forming study groups to work around these limitations and gain the benefits of both on- and offline learning with peer support

An issue not raised in the results but alluded to in the introduction is the Northern origins of the course and the attendant imbalance in knowledge production and dissemination. The LELI teachers appreciated *Teaching for Success'* international perspective and felt it enriched the learning experience, yet the British Council is an institution firmly moored in the global North and critics argue that MOOCs reproduce neo-colonial, hegemonic educational practices. To address this imbalance more Southern voices need to be heard, and higher education institutions in countries such as Timor-Leste need access to course production platforms. This would allow Southern

academics to produce courses specific to their local contexts, using languages of instruction which enable more learners in these areas to benefit from open online learning.

The experiences of this study group suggest to us that MOOCs such as *Teaching for Success* have potential to offer valuable CPD opportunities to English speaking teachers in Timor-Leste, particularly when blended with face-to-face interaction in study groups. Participants enjoyed the ability to access quality resources and share ideas with teachers both within their Personal Learning Networks and online. They also saw the course as an opportunity to become more collaborative, reflective teachers, and to improve their English language skills. Among the issues facing Timorese learners, internet access remains a major barrier to greater engagement, which is compounded by time constraints for teachers who often work long hours. Design issues such as limited formative assessment also restricted learner engagement, in addition to the cost and methods of payment for certification.

The course ended with a quote for participants to consider: *Change is inevitable, growth is optional*. For English teachers, as in other professions, the role of technology in driving change cannot be ignored. The results of this project suggest that MOOCs can support CPD, and course study groups can add the benefits of face-to-face, collaborative learning. This is a major change in the way professional development is provided to language teachers in Timor-Leste, but it can provide valuable, potentially transformative educational opportunities to teachers and other professionals.

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Dedicated to the memory of Jacinta Canossa Soares, our friend and colleague.

Chapter 8. Southern agency and digital education: An ethnography of open online learning in Dili, Timor-Leste

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Abstract

This ethnography, based on fieldwork in Dili, Timor-Leste between 2015 and 2017, adopts an orthodox sociological theorising of agency to investigate the ways in which people in Dili, Timor-Leste negotiate the numerous interacting structural barriers to digital education. Having identified a lack of attention to learner agency in the literature on the promotion and adoption of MOOCs and OERs in the Global South (M. King et al., 2018), the paper addresses Connell's (2008) influential criticism of the imbalances in global knowledge production, and the parallels in open education (Arinto et al., 2017). A new concept – Southern agency – is developed through the stories of three Timorese students and their engagement with digital education, focussing on the influences of local infrastructure, family, literacies and the colonial legacy. The paper highlights the need for more extensive research into local practices of learning with technologies and advocates Southern agency as a heuristic device to gain valuable insights into the lived experience of Southern learners.

Prologue: Testing the Infrastructure

It's a warm, dry afternoon in *Parque 5 Maio* in Dili, Timor-Leste in July 2015. Six covered picnic tables and benches follow the circular design of the garden, surrounding a 'hulk' statue of a muscle-bound Indonesian warrior in national dress breaking the chains of oppression, an ironic relic of the military occupation of the country from 1975-1999. At each bench groups of students gather in the shade around laptops purchased, usually using pooled family savings, from local electronics shops,

or in Batugade on the border with Indonesia, where devices are cheaper. The students are majoring in different university subjects; seated at one table is a group of architecture students from the local university, at another table sit students studying public health, and at another it is computer science. For the most part, the students sit quietly, waiting for web pages to load in the afternoon heat.

The students are here to access the comparatively cheap internet connectivity offered by a variety of telecommunications providers. Fifteen Wi-Fi 'hotspots' have opened in public spaces and on university campuses in Dili, offering an internet connection starting from USD 0.06c for 15 minutes and rising to $1.00 for 24 hours. The students use their pre-paid mobile phone credit and send a message to a toll-free number, which then gives them access to Wi-Fi. I have heard how difficult it can be accessing the internet in Timor-Leste, even in the hotspots, so I am keen to experience for myself what it's like. I enter the code for one hour of online access and within moments I am tethered to the net on my laptop via my phone. I have been told that the connections are often slow, but today I can log on to a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platform in a few seconds and soon afterwards I can play a course video, albeit with buffering delays. Five days later I return to the same spot and try the same thing; this time I can barely load the home page within the hour and the videos refuse to play.

8.1 Introduction

The experience above was recorded in the early phase of ethnographic field work by King (the first author) in Dili between 2015 and 2017 as part of a project investigating local digital education practices, and interrogating the possibilities and limitations of MOOCs and Open Education Resources (OERs) for improving educational opportunities in the global South. The bulk of the research took place at university online learning centres, where King engaged in a form of participatory action research, facilitating five MOOCs blended with face-to-face learning, holding drop-in sessions in

university-based online learning centres, observing and interviewing participants, and asking about their online practices in and around the Wi-Fi hotspots, university learning hubs, workplaces and other sites where digital education is practiced.

OERs are "digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and re-use for teaching, learning and research" (Hylén and Schuller 2007, p.7). OERs allow anyone with access to an internet-connected Information and Communications Technology (ICT) device to access material for free. MOOCs are a sequence of aggregated learning activities, often consisting of short videos, texts, and/or auto-, self- or peer-marked assessments, allowing education at scale. They are commonly presented on a 'freemium' model, where initial access is free, but accreditation or certification requires payment.

Within the field of digital education, MOOCs and OERs have been proposed as part of a scalar approach to meeting growing higher education demand in Southern countries (Bonk et al., 2015; Latchem, 2018; Laurillard & Kennedy, 2017; Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016), particularly through the growing ubiquity of mobile ICTs (McGreal, 2017). A number of authors have offered more critical assessments of the potential of MOOCs for people living in the Global South, identifying practical barriers to access (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013), post-humanist critiques of the assumptions of individual capacity for self-directed learning in OERs (Knox, 2013), and postcolonial critiques of academic neocolonialism and Northern hegemony in MOOCS and OER (Altbach, 2014; Head, 2015; Knox, 2016a; Rhoads et al., 2013; N. Shah, 2016; Traxler, 2018).

A number of authors point to the lack of learner-focussed studies of online learning in Southern settings (Daniel et al., 2015; Garrido et al., 2016; Nti, 2015). Responding to the call implied by these observations, we hone in on the experiences of three Timorese students whose stories help illustrate the broad array of motivations, opportunities and barriers experienced by students engaging in online learning via a range of ICTs and platforms. Having already noted that much of the research into MOOC and OER use in the global South reproduces top-down development thinking (M. King et al., 2018), this paper aims to surface the lived

experiences of three Timorese students. Through their stories we explore Southern agency as a means of better comprehending the complex interplay of individual actions within structures typical of Southern contexts, which both shape and are shaped by these individuals.

8.2 From Southern Theory to Southern Agency

We invoke the notion of Southern agency as a means of addressing a strong focus in the research literature on the structural barriers to open online learning and a concomitant lack of attention to the ways in which Southern learners engage with the promises, if not the opportunities, offered by OERs and MOOCs (M. King, Pegrum et al., 2018). The term 'Southern agency' references Connell's corrective to Northern academic hegemony in her important uncovering of *Southern Theory* (Connell, 2008), in which she challenges reductivist tendencies to view the South as a *source* of data at the same time as the North is portrayed as the place in which the grand theorising occurs. It is a pattern Arinto et al. (2017) see repeated in the field of open education.

Connell's ideas share a centre/periphery modality with (Bhambra 2007) interrogation of the Western/Northern bases for the foundations of modernity in social thought, and recognize the need to move towards a decentred 'provincialization' of Europe (Chakrabarty, 2000). Santos (2016) reads the dominance of Northern knowledge production as 'epistemicide', from which he promotes ideas centred around global ecologies of knowledge, emphasising the need for intercultural translation between these in seeking 'global cognitive justice'. These ideas are foundational to a conception of Southern agency.

In focussing attention on knowledge production in the South, it is necessary to explore questions of how Southern theory plays out in practice. The move from theory to practice is important, not least because of the ways in which it shifts a focus that is so evident in much of what is written regarding social, economic and educational 'interventions' imposed upon 'the South' by agents of a powerful global North.

Asymmetries in power are real and should not be ignored, but it is not a zero-sum game; power is more subtle, more spread through the social body, than is sometimes realised. It is helpful to imagine power as an enabling force allowing individuals to actively use a world that is using them (Ortner, 1989a). Foucault (1980: p. 189) put it neatly:

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.

Power, and concurrently agency, is distributed, albeit unevenly, through and between societies, with individuals seeking to exercise it within the structural frames of constraint and enablement in which they find themselves. With reference to educational practices, (Bingham 2001) writes of the interwoven impact of the dual impetus to reproduce societal norms and values and to transcend and transform them through education: "On one hand, education reproduces normed, self-sensibilities. On the other [it] is a prime location for production, a place where there is a potential for other forms of self to be created" (p.342). Applying this re-productive dialectic to our thinking about the interactions between structure and agency in everyday life, there is little dispute among contemporary social scientists regarding propositions that action is "contingently accomplished by situated actors" (Sayer 1990, p.248). And yet various social scientists position themselves differently when it comes to questions about the relationship between structure and agency. For example, (Sen 1999), emphasising the importance of recognising individuals living in the South as "agents" not "patients" (p.137), acknowledges the "deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements" (p. xii), at the same time as he equates agency with freedom of action (p.137).

The tendency among social scientists to equate agency with freedom of action is understandable. In the face of what often appear to be overwhelming structural barriers impoverishing and repressing people in all parts of the globe, but particularly

in the Global South, the idea that people have any sort of choice seems impossible without some form of transcendence of these oppressive structures. Revolution may offer the ultimate path to individual and collective freedom, but this is not necessarily agency, and certainly not in the sociological understanding of it rendered above. Structured, cultured decision-making is part of every living moment of every human being, regardless of geography (Forsey, 2015b). (Deeds Ermarth 2001, p.48) captures the banality of much of human agency poignantly, through her philosophical exploration of personal agency as a product of the discursive postmodern condition. Amidst all of the limitations faced by individual persons in day-to-day activities:

> I construct—you construct, he and she and they construct—the unique and unrepeatable poetry of an individual life. It is not the basis for a Mission Statement; it is not a World Historical Vision of identity, action, and progress… It is humbler, less passive, more creative, possibly even more effective.

Southern agency refers to an individual's engagement within the particular forms of constraint and opportunity that exemplify life for many in countries of the global South. It is the mix of structured, cultured choices people face and their ability to work with the resources available to exercise power, limited as it may be. In the context of this study, we identify four themes emerging from the data which shape digital education practices. The first is the influence of local infrastructure, which in the context of digital education takes the form of ICTs and the means of connection to the internet. The second is the influence of family, and the level of support - financial, emotional and otherwise– that family and kinship groups give to educational endeavours. The third is the effect of literacies on personal agency, and the last is the enduring colonial legacy, which permeates cultures of the global South, and continues to shape practice.

8.3 The Timorese Context

Timor-Leste is a country emerging from four centuries of colonization, first by Portugal and more recently by Indonesia, which occupied the country from 1975-1999, causing the deaths in conflict– through starvation or disease– of an estimated 100,000 people (CAVR 2013). Independence was finally achieved in 2002, and since then the nation's relative calm has been punctured by two periods of civil strife in 2006 and 2007. These conflicts exposed various geographic and social divisions within the country, including tensions between the police and armed forces (Leach, 2016b). More recently the country has undergone further political turmoil with no party able to establish a governing majority, amidst accusations of government corruption, and a contracting, oil-dependent economy (Graca Feijo, 2019).

Under Portuguese rule, education was reserved for the privileged few who were able to speak Portuguese, while under Indonesian occupation it was expanded as a form of mass indoctrination into Indonesian culture and political life (Sexton & da Costa, 2018). During the brief period of decolonisation from Portugal and the early years of Indonesian occupation, Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN) introduced a literacy program using the principles of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which aimed to improve local language literacy as well as raise political consciousness (Leach, 2016a). In the post-independence era, the education system has been criticised for reproducing didactic pedagogies, framed in Freirean terms as a 'banking' system where students are empty accounts to be filled with knowledge, and allowing residual 'colonial epistemologies' to dominate the curriculum (R. Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016).

Internet access was severely restricted under Indonesian occupation, while in the early days of independence, it was prohibitively expensive for most Timorese, with a company majority owned by Portugal Telecom, Timor Telecom, being the sole telecommunications provider. Two new players entered the market in 2012, Indonesian provider Telkomcel, and Telemor, a subsidiary of Vietnamese telco Vietel. From that point usage expanded rapidly, predominantly through mobile access, despite the fact that a basic smart phone starts at around $80 USD and a gigabyte of

data costs around $5, in a land where the annual Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in 2015 was USD $2180, or around $6 a day (United Nations Committee for Development Policy, 2018).

Dili is a city of approximately 200,000 people and the political and economic epicentre of Timor-Leste. It has a large student population derived from across the country, with 25,597 of 38,395 higher education students surveyed in the 2015 census residing in the municipality of Dili (Government of Timor-Leste General Directorate of Statistics, 2017). Many young people move to the city for their education, often staying with older siblings or aunts and uncles. As elsewhere in the Global South, there is a growing demand for higher education places, a reality that contributed to student protests against overcrowding at the national university in March 2017. Education is predominantly conducted in the joint national languages of Tetum and Portuguese, although Bahasa Indonesia remains in use in some textbooks. English is viewed as a language of international education, and English language proficiency is essential for those looking to gain a sought-after overseas scholarship. It is within this political, social, infrastructural and linguistic context that we examine the utility of digital education.

8.4 Methodology

Data for the overall project were collected by King in Dili between February 2015 and January 2017. He assumed a variety of roles ranging from an ‘action researcher’ exploring ways of facilitating student engagement with MOOCs and OER through dialogue with the students and teachers, to an engaged observer of online learning practices, and an interviewer of local students and teachers. His research approach reflects the realities of practicing educational ethnography in digital spaces, where the researcher is simultaneously “embodied, distributed and mobile” (Landri 2013, p.239). Accordingly, the project reflects multi-sited ethnographic sensibilities (Marcus 2009) in that King followed the trails of digital education use that opened up before him in the various periods of time spent in Dili.

These trails led King into various higher education classrooms as a non-participatory observer. On other occasions he assumed more direct and active roles when he facilitated an informal English conversation club on the Liceu campus of Universidad Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) in Dili. As already indicated, he also 'hung out' at various public Wi-Fi hotspots around the city. Along the way, semi-structured individual and small focus group interviews were conducted with 127 Timorese university students, international development scholarship alumni, lecturers, and other education stakeholders.

The most recent field research in Dili conducted between February and July 2017 involved introducing OER and MOOCs in English to English-speaking Timorese adult learners. King conducted semi-structured interviews and less formal discussions with around 50 students who attended a weekly drop-in session at the US government-funded *Uma Amerika* (America House) on the central campus of UNTL, including the student we will call Rosa. A number of participants regularly attended these sessions, and their interviews and engagement with online learning resources using this field site provided rich 'over the shoulder' insights into the practices of online learning. King also interviewed 16 Timorese participants who had discovered digital education resources independently, either through MOOCs, OERs or paid online courses, including the participants we will call Ines and Vasco.

King's positioning in the field was often a challenge, regularly shifting from investigator/participant observer to facilitator or 'social-cultural animator' (Tacchi et al., 2003). Sometimes he was looking to promote opportunities for digital education among interested learners, at other times he was a more passive observer of student engagement with education and technology. While difficult to manage, these changing roles provided multiple perspectives from which to view learner engagement with various forms of online education, with varying levels of support.

In keeping with our concerns about student agency we focus here on individual students in developing three case studies of students living in Dili at the time of the research. Their stories help illuminate the potential of MOOCs and OERs to provide educational opportunities to people in the global South, and turning to individual

stories of selected participants is an approach that has precedence in digital anthropology (Miller, 2009). Drawing from "the empathy of ethnography, immersed in the lives of specific people" (Miller 2009: p.20), the three individuals we focus attention on are:

1. Rosa, a student in her early 20s at UNTL;

2. Ines, a doctor in her mid-30s working in a central Dili medical clinic;

3. Vasco, a development management consultant in his late 30s

(All names are pseudonyms)

As will become clear, Rosa, Ines and Vasco represent different forms of success achieved by leveraging digital education sources. Their stories demonstrate particular forms of learning practice shaped by the various structured, cultured influences the individuals faced every day, reflecting broader social patterns in these sorts of spaces. While successful navigation of a global educational landscape might imply an ability to transcend structural and cultural barriers, it is important to remind ourselves that this is not a necessary requirement for recognition or enactment of individual agency. The project reported here did not pay attention to those individuals who have never engaged with digital education, so the agency of such persons, with its variable mix of resistance, lack of opportunity and/or desire, and compliance with forms of social practice eschewing formal education, cannot be considered.

We shift 'voice' now to King's account of the three participants' experiences.

Rosa

Rosa was the first student I met at the English Conversation Club at UNTL in 2015, and one of the first to sign up to the drop-in sessions at the Uma Amerika. Diminutive in stature, she was self-assured in conversation, even when speaking with me in her fourth language. Her family was originally based in Baucau, and fled in 2006 to escape

the civil strife, ending up Ossu in the central south of the country. She moved to Dili in her teens to start senior high school. A highly competent user of digital technology, she enjoyed participating in global popular culture via social media and the internet. I remember arriving at the *Uma Amerika* one morning and noticing Rosa sitting with a friend watching and laughing along to an episode of the YouTube series 'Car Pool Karaoke' which portrayed British singer Adele being driven around the streets of London, singing along to her own songs. Rosa was initially a regular attendee at the evening Conversation Club, but was unable to continue attending due to family concerns for her safety when travelling home unescorted at night. This denial of access exemplifies one of a series of 'offline' societal barriers to the involvement of South (Perryman & de Los Arcos, 2016) which are amplified when families and individuals are unable to access the internet at home.

Rosa was organising a public environmental awareness day with a group of friends at the time I was working with her in May 2017. As part of this preparation, she had accessed various OER that helped deepen her understanding of environmental issues. She sat down with me to search for courses she might be interested in and we found a MOOC with a free certificate on the subject of the water cycle, offered by an Australian university. Once she had created her account, she quickly picked up the linear progression of course steps and opened her first video. There was a concept check question at the end of the recording; after a brief pause to consider new subject-specific vocabulary she correctly answered the question, and suddenly she was onto the next step, reading instructions, and keen to try the next quiz.

The internet in the *Uma Amerika* was unreliable and power outages were a regular occurrence, reflecting infrastructure issues elsewhere in the global South (Castillo et al., 2015; Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013; Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014). Visitors often sat for their allotted half hour internet session without being able to load a single web page. Other project participants described using more creative strategies for accessing a good internet connection, including gaining clandestine access to the Wi-Fi connections of their neighbours, in friends' workplaces, and at local offices of businesses and government departments. Rosa had a simple strategy to

maximise her online study; her parents supported her in buying a daily mobile data package for USD $1. She discovered that going online later at night at home was easier because the network was quieter and pages would load more quickly, so she set aside time to complete online tasks by tethering her laptop to her phone. Intermittent access made it a challenge to complete the course within the time-limited enrolment period and she failed the final quiz after losing the connection while attempting to answer the questions; however, her high scores in the previous assessments enabled her to pass the course overall.

The support of Rosa's family also helped frame her aspirations for study overseas. Her uncle had escaped Dili in 1975 after the Indonesian invasion and settled in Australia. When Rosa was 16, she visited him together with one of her five siblings during their school holidays, experiencing Australian life, language and culture first-hand. In her final years of high school Rosa had been part of a US government-funded 'microscholarship' program at the local English language school, intended to prepare senior high school students with good English language proficiency and excellent school grades for scholarship applications. Her teacher explained that she had been one of the strongest students in the class but remained unsuccessful after three applications. The teacher further explained that there was a feeling among the class that the selection system for some scholarships was unfair, and that candidates had won places at overseas universities more based on who their family knew, rather than their abilities.

Rosa was trying to gain a foothold in a process that she sees will give her educational opportunities, and a MOOC is a means of helping gain and evidence the skills she needed to attain a scholarship. She recognised value in her water cycle course certificate, explaining that online certificates from outside Timor were more 'believable' than those generated within her home nation:

> I think it's kind of like… strong evidence that like because it's through online and there's a certificate and those certificates are not from East Timor because they're from Australia it's more international so people get to believe it quickly instead of just a local certificate.

Because this certificate was both online and "not from East Timor" it had greater cultural capital with which she could stake a claim to scholarship opportunities. Other interviewees who were international scholarship alumni were often critical of the Timorese high school system and the passive learning they felt it produces. As one commented:

> In high school you have to sit for three hours and then break and then three hours and then break and then one hour and you go home and it's all just not really interactive between teachers and students and it's mostly just teachers going and then teaching you know students just write notes and then study and come and do exams, so I don't see the activities like … the interaction between the teachers and the students… you don't see as well the critical thinking of the students.

Elsewhere, the students in *Parque 5 de Maio* described in the prologue were often copying out the results of internet searches without necessarily engaging critically with the information. These didactic, rote approaches to learning are a residual effect of the Indonesian and Portuguese eras, and remain reproduced in the education system.

In June 2017 Rosa won a scholarship to the United States to study Environmental Science. In order to help her preparation for this study, she sought out other online courses in subjects like chemistry because she had studied these subjects in Portuguese in high school and she wanted to build her academic English vocabulary in these areas. Her experiences exemplify the kinds of structural hurdles faced by people in Dili looking to engage with digital education. The limitations of local infrastructure compelled her to develop strategies to work around these constraints, while the support of her family allowed her the time and finances to learn online. Her language and digital literacies allowed her to make the most of the educational opportunities presented, which in turn enabled her to further develop these skills independently of any formal classroom. This all occurred in a city littered with the vestiges of colonialism, from the symbolic memorials to Indonesian and Portuguese occupation she passed every day, to the practical reproduction of colonial-era

practices in education. It is interesting to contemplate how such influences combine to shape individual practice, while allowing opportunities, however limited, for people to leverage the educational potential of low cost or free online education resources such as MOOCs and OERs.

Ines

Ines was a medical doctor in her 30s, one of a group of approximately 700 students who studied five years of medicine in Cuba in the 2000s. She works in a charity-funded clinic in the centre of Dili alongside a number of other Cuban-educated Timorese general practitioners together with foreign doctors trained in the UK, the US and Australia. She is very close to her family and she describes having spent almost all of her monthly study stipend in Cuba on telephone calls home. In her workday a steady queue of patients come from all around the city and surrounding districts seeking treatment for a wide range of health issues, which, if the public health posters on the front gate are anything to go by, include leprosy and tuberculosis.

Ines had recently started an online course studying for the International Pediatric Postgraduate Certificate (IPPC) hosted by an Australian university for a heavily subsidized fee, paid for by the clinic. Due to restrictive local internet connectivity, the clinic's managers arranged for DVDs of course lectures to be sent to Dili and viewed offline, a form of study with digital resources which has been explored elsewhere as an effective way of working around infrastructure limitations (Jurado & Pettersson, 2011). When it came to working with the imported recordings, Ines studied together with a Scottish and another Timorese doctor. They sat together at the same laptop watching the lectures, taking notes and discussing– partly to concept-check the meaning of various medical terms and partly to contextualise the course content to local conditions. Context was a recurring issue, and course content often focussed on Western medical issues such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which is entirely undiagnosed in Timor-Leste, whereas common local health issues such as malnutrition and tropical disease were not addressed. This reflects

wider concerns about the relevance of online educational content to learners and about gaps in context (Richter & McPherson, 2012). Ines explained that she didn't feel confident in contributing to online forum discussions as part of the course, but she read them and found them a rich source of knowledge.

Ines enjoyed the course but explained that she had difficulty moving between languages when working and studying. Switching language codes was an exhausting everyday reality; in her work at the clinic she interacted with patients in a mixture of local languages, and when studying she translated the concepts presented in English through the course into Spanish, then discussed them with her colleagues in English and sometimes Tetum. Like many Timorese, Ines was plurilingual. Different life roles require different languages (Coste et al., 2009), and she was engaging in a form of online Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Coyle et al., 2010), improving her English language skills through engagement with resources aimed at improving specific non-language subject area knowledge. Working between languages for work and study was mentally taxing, which illustrates another barrier for those in the Global South looking to engage with Anglo-centric digital education.

Working with her managers and peers, Ines was well-supported, and there is a growing body of evidence in the literature on the benefits of working in groups as a means of augmenting online learning (Bulger et al., 2015; Firmansyah & Timmis, 2016; Li et al., 2014; Maitland & Obeysekare, 2015), including as part of this research project (M. King, Luan, et al., 2018). Studying predominantly offline, she was able to sidestep infrastructure challenges and participate in a small community of practice to contextualise course content within the local environment as she worked on the qualification one unit at a time to fit with her workload.

Vasco

Vasco had clear motivations for online study. He needed a high International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score, "7.5 or 8" out of 9 on the academic exam, to be able to study at one of the world's preeminent universities in England. His journey

to the gates of the esteemed institution was circuitous, starting in a small isolated village in the central mountains. He vividly remembers the Indonesian occupation. In high school he had not been particularly interested in learning English, but as the 1999 independence referendum approached:

> …there were, you know, discussions about UN, possible UN intervention and I thought 'Now is the time to really get on it' because I think it was going to be very possible - if Timor was going to get independent, it's not only, like getting independence is one thing but getting it working and running it's another, takes a lot of people with right capacity, right skills, people need exposure to different knowledge, different experiences and I thought people who speak English would be a quite important avenue for me to actually build on.

As a teenager, his view of the outside world was mediated through limited access to Western TV programs on the heavily restricted Indonesian state channel. Watching archive footage of the NASA moon landing was a defining moment for him, and he decided that if Americans could travel to the moon while he couldn't leave his village without being obliged to perform various humiliating tasks such as doing push ups for the soldiers at village checkpoints, then he had to travel to study in the US.

Vasco's education was strongly influenced by his family. When he finished high school, he sat down with his father, a trained nurse with a strong work ethic, and signed a performance-based contract. The father agreed to support Vasco's university studies financially on the condition that he achieved consistently high grades. Vasco studied at the National University in Dili and signed up to all the free English classes offered by the UN and other agencies working in Dili. He hung out on the waterfront with his textbooks, talking to foreigners and improving his English skills, until he gained work as an interpreter with the UN in 2001.

Vasco's first opportunity to study abroad came while he was working with a local NGO monitoring the Timorese justice system, and he travelled to South Africa to participate in a study fellowship. His father was concerned that Vasco was travelling to a place he saw as being on the same level of development as Timor-Leste.

Eventually he gave his consent and Vasco studied and developed his English for eight months. From this opportunity he was able to gain a scholarship to study an undergraduate degree in the United States and upon graduation he transferred to a Master's degree at a London University as part of the European Erasmus Mundo scholarship program. This qualification provided the institutional cultural capital that eased the path towards well-paid development consultancy work in Dili. It also opened up further opportunities for postgraduate study, and in early 2017 he began the application process for another Master's degree in Public Policy.

In order to prepare for the IELTS exam, Vasco searched online and tried a few YouTube video tutorials before finding an online preparation course, but most content was behind a paywall. He did not have a credit card to pay the USD $50 access fee; however, he had a prepaid travel money card provided by a foreign exchange company that he had used on previous travel to Europe, with enough remaining balance to be able to cover the cost of the course. He discovered that his listening skills needed improvement according to the dictates of the exam, and he learned strategies for questions he had found difficult in previous attempts. He credits the preparation course with helping him get the IELTS score he needed to gain entry to the Master's course. Vasco's story demonstrates the multiplying effect of institutional cultural capital; once he gained an international qualification, he was able to grasp further opportunities, and online learning gave him access to the sorts of exam strategies necessary to achieve his aim. He was part of a generation born during the Indonesian occupation, and the colonial experience shaped his practice in motivating him to seize opportunities during the period of decolonization and early independence.

8.5 Fine margins for success

In drawing upon these three stories of Timorese students taking up digital education and using it to their advantage, it would be misleading to conclude that Southern agency is necessarily a positive, constructive activity with exclusively successful

outcomes. The margins for success for these participants were often fine, from Rosa managing to score highly enough on her early MOOC assessments to pass her course after losing her internet connection, to Vasco having just enough balance left in an old travel money account to pay for course access. The opening story illustrates that the frustrations of getting online in Dili, let alone learning there, fundamentally restrict individual educational practices. For every participant who was able to access learning resources, there were many, many more for whom the barriers to access proved insurmountable, and their interactions with MOOCs and OERs ended before they began. Presenting cases where individuals were able to negotiate the barriers to learning online serves to highlight the difficulties in achieving this aim, rather than to suggest that successful experiences are the norm.

8.6 Discussion

There is an old joke in development studies that asks about the difference between an economist and a sociologist. The punch line that "Economics is all about how people make choices" whereas "Sociology is all about why they don't have any choices to make" (Duesenberry 1960, p.233) points to how sociological thought has changed. As evidenced in Giddens' idea of 'structuration' (Giddens 1990), or Bourdieu's commitment to 'practice' (Bourdieu 1977), the notion that humans are structured agents is now accepted to the point of orthodoxy (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sayer, 1990). We cannot escape agency any more than we can escape the enabling and constraining cultural and structural forces at play in individual lives.

Portraits of social life filtered through the lens of a practice perspective aim at producing accounts that are as grounded in everyday life as they are in elucidating the forms of domination and power underpinning these lives (Forsey, 2007). Whilst we agree with (Reckwitz 2002) that, as is the case in all theoretical or interpretive domains, practice theory is not factually true in the strict sense of the term, we find it impossible to imagine any human action that is independent from structural influences or cultural training. (Ortner 1996), a key figure in the development of

practice theory in anthropology, names such free agency as a fantasy of the West, but we prefer the ideational over the spatial descriptor in this instance and opt for portraying such independence as a liberal fantasy (Forsey, 2015a). Post- Humanist (Knox, 2016b) and postcolonial (N. Shah, 2016) critiques of OERs and MOOCs arrive at much the same conclusion.

Rosa, Ines and Vasco's interactions with digital education reveal much about the kinds of power they exercised and the choices they made. In this context four themes emerge which serve as reference points for closer examination of Southern agency.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The first and perhaps most powerful force impacting learning is local infrastructure and its effects on the access to and quality of learning experiences. Learners in Dili need to navigate barriers including the high cost of ICTs relative to income, and access to internet bandwidth sufficient to connect with online learning resources. Rosa's strategy of using a combination of internet hubs and mobile access as needed showed her adaptability and determination to work around these challenges and meet her educational needs. Ines' ability to access course resources offline demonstrated her ability to improvise with her peers in order to make use of digital education. This was also demonstrated by the more clandestine practices described by other participants in accessing local Wi-Fi networks, a powerful form of Southern 'per poor' innovation whereby novel ways of using technologies are initiated at grassroots level (Heeks, 2009). Such innovation has its limits; field research in the municipalities outside Dili revealed far more limited bandwidth, highlighting the enormous contrast in access to digital education within many nation states (Selwyn, 2013) which fundamentally limits individual choices and practices, profoundly affecting the choices made in those settings.

FAMILY

The influence of family support on student success in countries of the global South (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001; Kao & Park, 2016). It was a recurring theme in the life stories of the research participants in this project. In Timor-Leste, a complex network of family and kinships relationships beyond the local level underpins social life (Brown, 2012). This is evidenced by the reliance of students in Dili on pooled family resources to buy laptops and phone cards and to pay education fees. Families invest in children, often in selective ways, to carry family aspirations.

Vasco's father's reservations over his son's choice of South Africa for his first opportunity for overseas study signified some of the pressures placed on those who choose, or are chosen, to study. The strong ties to home and family felt by Ines when studying in Cuba also represented a common way family can constrain action, even if unintentionally, as the distances involved in travelling to study can amplify the anxiety of separation from close family networks. The transformative power of an overseas scholarship, with all of its attendant need for appropriate cultural and social capital, is countered by the tremendous disruption and dislocation that can affect an individual's wellbeing. Another participant described how, after a year on a scholarship away from his wife and young family, he begged his host university to award him a lesser degree so he could return to them. Family shapes individual local education practices, digital and otherwise, empowering individuals to achieve goals, whilst simultaneously constraining those goals, particularly in settings where economic resources are limited.

LITERACIES

The research revealed the importance of literacies, specifically in English as the *lingua franca* of digital education and international scholarships, and the development of digital literacies to engage in online learning. The ability of many Timorese to perform varying roles in multiple languages exemplifies plurilingualism. Ines' need to switch language codes regularly within her work and study life revealed the persistent,

considerable pressures of practice under challenging conditions, but her language skills were also empowering, allowing her to practice medicine, help her community and secure her and her family's future. Vasco's entry to an English university was dependent on him developing strategies to score highly in the IELTS exam, which in the words of one teacher participant is a "blunt tool" for measuring English academic literacy. The requirements of the exam, the 'IELTS literacy' required to reach the score required, was a significant structurating force in Vasco's life. His use of online resources enabled him to develop and demonstrate his proficiency at a considerable cost of time, money and effort.

The three research subjects were confident and competent in their use of ICTs, reflecting their relatively high levels of education and digital literacy development through usage of the internet. Others involved in the research had difficulties with activities such as manipulating a mouse and using various keyboard functions, which limited their capacity to engage with digital content. These are part of a suite of basic skills and literacies needed for individuals to harness the educational opportunities available through digital technologies, including the increasingly popular mobile ICTs (Pegrum, 2019). Ines' experience of working with a peer group is one means through which students can support each other to develop these literacies, and add value to the learning experience. This is also a response to post-humanist critiques of the assumptions underlying self-directed learning with OERs and MOOCs. Individuals working together can empower each other, helping them to learn new concepts and develop these key literacies.

COLONIZATION

Finally, the colonial legacy shared by countries of the global South shapes individual practice in a number of ways. The links between colonialism and education have been illuminated by (Freire 2000), among others, and digital education can often reproduce didactic, elitist teaching methods- a form of Euro-North American academic and educational neocolonialism (Head, 2015; Rhoads et al., 2013; Selwyn, 2013). These

criticisms are valid, but at the same time critics of Northern academic hegemony, often located in the North, ignore the value students in the South place on Northern digital education (Traxler, 2018). Rosa saw value in the fact that her MOOC certificate was not from Timor-Leste while Ines' chose to work around the unsuitability of some of her course content to gain a highly valued Northern qualification.

The high demand for scholarship places in Northern universities is another product of the desire for a perceived better education and the life-changing power an overseas qualification gives to individuals. Scholarships reproduce the North-South power imbalances typifying the colonial condition, and those who want to win a scholarship need to meet the structured conditions of entry to a system that confers power in the form of institutional cultural capital with geographic and social mobility. There is a growing body of work linking digital education and mobility (Traxler 2018; Gallagher 2018) and there are clear impacts of mobility on individuals, including the disruption and dislocation experienced by those who move to study and the sacrifices these students must make.

Education is a key field for the application of Southern theory (Connell, 2014), and digital education seems equally suitable, especially given the growth of ICT usage in countries such as Timor-Leste. Further research into practices of learning with technology in Timor-Leste and other countries throughout the global South could inform future programs aiming to decolonise education and provide quality local educational opportunities, "empowering educators and students to be the creators of their own materials and knowledge, not just recipients or adapters of others' work" (Arinto et al., 2017, p.3-4) Writing about learning design, Goodyear (2015, p.34) uses a geographic metaphor to describe the workings of structure and agency on learning, as students walk through a landscape "shaped by the actions of people and things". Teaching involves "the setting in place of epistemic, material and social structures that guide, but do not determine what people do." Enacting this in the global South requires a commitment to reimagining this landscape as an extension of Santos' useful articulation of an 'ecosystem of knowledges' (Santos, 2016) where the Western/Northern liberal canon becomes one of an often-interrelated system of endogenous knowledge practices.

Deeds Ermath (2001 p.48) proposes a "smaller, humbler, less passive, more creative" reading of agency in contemporary life. In applying this proposition to a Southern context, the intention is to reveal something of the strategies taken and the choices made by individuals which both constrain and enable practice. By looking at individual examples, the scale of the study runs counter to the ambitions of MOOCs and OER to educate *en masse*, but allows a focus on the more personal elements of human agency which are often overlooked, highlighting the fine margins for success, the personal sacrifices and the pressures facing students seeking to improve their lives.

8.7 Conclusion

These stories of Timorese students emphasise that the distribution of power within and between social fields is not a zero-sum game, even in a country in the Global South. These people were not the poorest in their society, but neither were they part of a wealthy elite. They accessed ICTs and the internet despite considerable obstacles, supported by families that valued and valorised education, developing a range of literacies in order to engage with digital education, all in an environment marked by the colonial legacy. Southern agency as a concept is underexplored in the academic literature, and the aim here has been to introduce it as a heuristic device to study individual practices and come to a clearer understanding of the challenges individuals face, which can inform future projects designed to decolonise digital education.

Rosa, Ines and Vasco illustrate that in places like Dili, people are engaging with digital education while facing considerable barriers, as part of their attempts to seize educational opportunities. The experiences of these students and their learning practices provide a useful starting point for exploring the role of individuals in grasping these opportunities. Neither victims of northern hegemony or neo-colonial dupes, these southern learners are agents in their own right, but rarely, if ever, in the conditions of their choosing. Participant-centred investigation of digital education in Southern contexts is an area with much potential for further research, and Southern

agency, like Southern theory, demands a focus shift toward the Global South with its multiple sites of knowledge engagement and educational re-production.

Chapter 9. International scholarships and Southern agency: An ethnography of alumni, scholars, and applicants.

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Abstract

International scholarships are an established mode of aid distribution for many donor countries and a life-changing educational opportunity for recipients from the global South. This paper draws upon ethnographic field research centred on Dili, Timor-Leste, focussing on case studies of a scholarship applicant, a scholar, and an alumnus. It employs the concept of *Southern agency,* investigating individual practices shaped by influences which both constrain and enable action, namely local infrastructure, family and kinship groups, literacies, and the colonial legacy. Scholarship places are limited and extremely competitive, while assigning a moral imperative for alumni to learn and return to contribute to local development, often resulting in the re-production of socially normed roles echoing the colonial era. The global upheaval in higher education resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes the need for alternative interventions in the global South, including greater investment in local higher education institutions, and online learning.

9.1 Introduction: International scholarships and Southern agency

This paper has its origins in a research project investigating the potential for digital education to provide quality educational opportunities for individuals in Dili, Timor-Leste. Initially this involved meeting, teaching and interviewing English-speaking students and other young people in and around classrooms and internet access hubs (M. King et al., 2019). It quickly became apparent that almost every participant shared

the same goal: to win an international scholarship to study overseas. The research shifted focus, posing new questions regarding these individuals' educational aspirations and practices. What motivates people to apply for international scholarships, and what do they gain from them? Further, how might aid interventions in education be more effective, responsive, and socially responsible, especially in a post-COVID world?

9.2 Donor rationales, individual motivations

International scholarship programmes have been a locus of public diplomatic effort for donors of overseas development assistance (ODA) since the colonial period, when scholars were educated in institutions of the global metropole to return as model imperial citizens (Pietsch, 2011) and assume administrative roles (Varghese, 2008). During the Cold War, programmes such as the Rhodes Scholarship in the United Kingdom, the Fulbright Scholarship in the United States, and the Colombo Plan in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, recruited thousands of students from the 'third world' to win 'hearts and minds' (Lowe, 2010; Varghese, 2008) and as part of capacity building programmes (Cuthbert et al., 2008). More recently, South-South scholarships are increasingly common, as countries such as India and China compete for global influence (Mawdsley, 2012).

Donor rationales for scholarships include the development of recipients' skills and knowledge, the exercise of 'soft' power, the promotion of social change, and the pursuit of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as the internationalisation of and widening participation in education (Campbell & Neff, 2020). Swedish (Tvedten et al., 2020) and German (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschidenst, 2019) scholarship programme evaluations highlight North-South institutional collaboration and evidence of successful research cooperation and capacity development. The positive impact of programmes is difficult to quantify (Mawer, 2017), with no official metric for progress toward SDG 4.B: increased international scholarship provision (UNESCO, 2020). Programme evaluations rely on alumni self-evaluations, making them vulnerable to the "peril of positive assumptions"

(Lowe & Kent, 2017, p.3), while international scholarships consistently fail to benefit the most disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2014b). International scholarships are one of a range of education aid interventions available (Dassin et al., 2018), and ODA can fund local educational infrastructure. The Austrian government for example concluded some time ago that international scholarship programmes had limited impact, committing instead to funding in-country programmes (ÖSB Consulting Gmbh & L&R Sozialforschung OEG, 2007).

Research into international scholarship recipients reveals scholars are motivated by the desire to 'give back' to their community as teachers (Campbell et al., 2020), leaders, (Campbell & Baxter, 2019), and researchers (Franken, 2012), as well as the opportunity for career advancement and a quality education (Ahmad et al., 2017). Alumni equate 'giving back' with 'going back', often working in government or international development agencies in their home country (Campbell, 2017). While their study experience is roundly positive, returning scholars can face difficulties in effecting change (Abimbola et al., 2016) and finding employment (Enkhtur, 2019). The moral imperative for students to repay in kind the investment in their education is a key shaper of the scholarship experience. Tensions can arise between donors and alumni over scholarship conditions dictating alumni career paths (Campbell, 2018), and scholars often face competing pressures from family and donors over their contribution to local development after graduation (Baxter, 2019).

9.3 Southern agency in practice

International scholarship ODA is channelled directly to an individual, rather than to a government or programme, magnifying the power asymmetry between donor and recipient. And yet, individual scholarship alumni and recipients, even applicants, are not powerless, and the distribution of power, soft or otherwise, is not a zero-sum equation. Power can be an enabling, creative force distributed through social networks (Foucault, 1980). Previous research has employed the concept of *Southern agency*, denoting "an individual's engagement within the particular forms of constraint and opportunity that exemplify life for many in countries of the global

South" (M. King et al., 2019). Applying Southern theory (Connell, 2008) to individual action, Southern agency adopts a practice-based sociological approach, understanding individual agency to be simultaneously constrained and enabled by social structures and vice versa. It marks a form of 'structuration' (Giddens, 1990), or 'practice' (Bourdieu, 1977) shaping transformative change but also the more quotidian choices and decisions individuals make throughout their life course (Forsey, 2010b). The decision to apply for international scholarships presents applicants with a new set of structurating forces shaping the practice of scholarship aspirants within the terms and conditions of the scholarship that trigger particular choices. To receive these opportunities, and all the potential for personal transformation they offer, individuals must act in certain ways and meet specific criteria, which can result in the re-production of societal roles directed towards particular forms of community action.

This paper uses an ethnographic approach to investigate the experiences of individual scholarship alumni, recipients, and applicants, revealing some of the structured, cultured agency (Forsey, 2010b) enacted by these individuals as they navigate local infrastructure, family and kinship group expectations, literacies, and the colonial legacy– the essence of Southern agency. It highlights the challenges applicants face and the strategies they adopt to win a scholarship place, and how recipients meeting the obligation to learn and return to contribute to local development. The paper concludes by considering the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the possibility for alternative scalable education interventions in the global South.

9.4 The Timorese context

Timor-Leste was a distant outpost of the Portuguese empire for over 400 years until decolonization in 1975. The Catholic church, which remains a cornerstone of Timorese society, administered an education system reserved for the colonial elite, with national literacy rates in 1975 at around 10% (Timor-Leste Ministry of Education, 2015). After a brief independence, an Indonesian military occupation caused widespread human rights abuses and claimed approximately 100,000 Timorese lives

(CAVR, 2013). The Indonesian government-built schools, founded a university in Dili, and focused on indoctrinating Timorese to believe they were Indonesian, moves met with no small degree of local resistance (Sexton & da Costa, 2018).

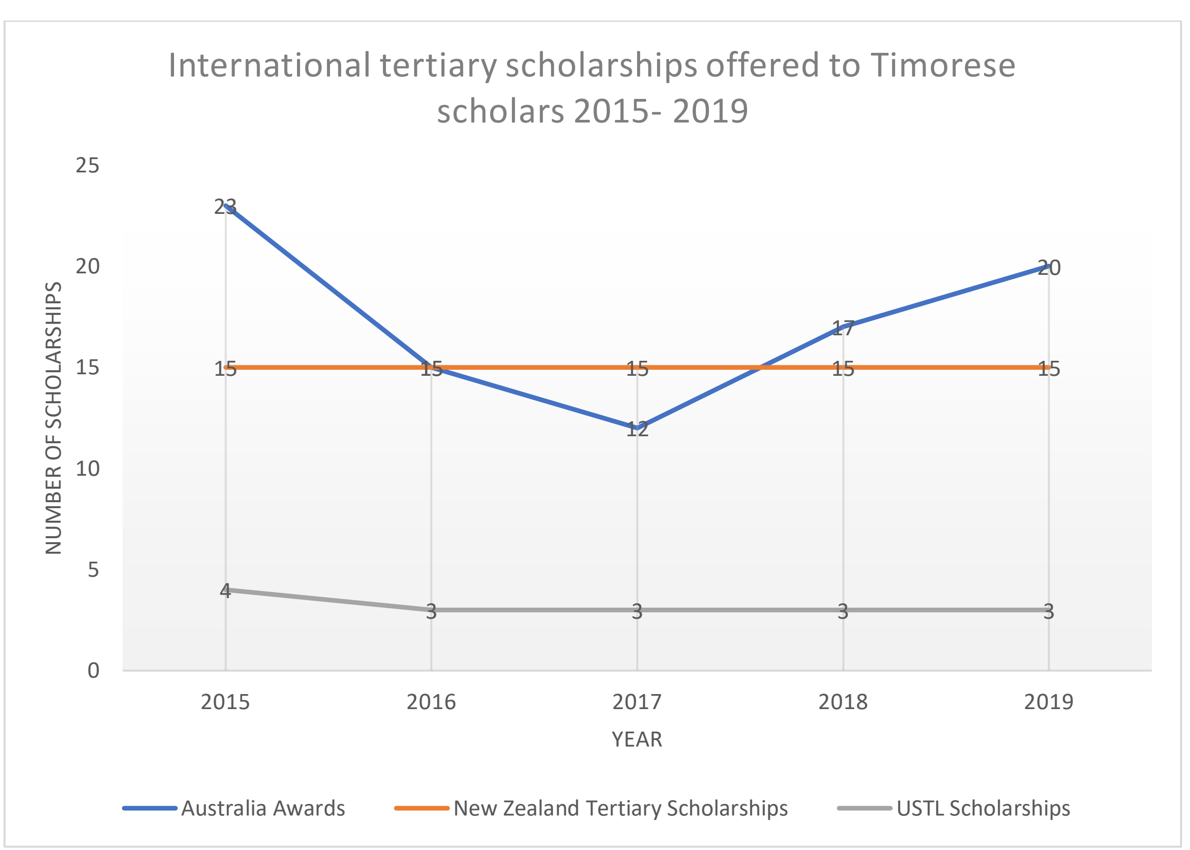
In 1999, a United Nations-brokered independence referendum set the country on a path to nationhood after a violent Indonesian withdrawal, and a UN transitional authority oversaw the initial phases of reconstruction. The first national elections were held in 2002, and the UN maintained a series of missions there until 2012.

Contemporary Timor-Leste faces numerous socio-economic challenges, including a heavy dependence on dwindling oil and gas resources and ODA from Australia, Portugal, New Zealand and China, among others. The country is effectively a rentier state with an expanded, big-spending government bureaucracy (Neves, 2018), a nascent urban middle class (Barbara et al., 2015), and a youth population 'bulge' resulting from a post-independence birth rate spike (H. Hill, 2018). The education system is influenced by a 'hidden curriculum' re-producing didactic Portuguese and Indonesian-era attitudes and pedagogies, which continue to shape teaching and learning practices (H. Hill, 2007). The university sector is beset by issues of 'access, quality and relevance' (UNESCO, 2014c), and just 4% of 18-year-olds are enrolled in post-secondary education (Inder et al., 2019). The 57% unemployment rate for 15–29-year-old tertiary graduates is attributed to the search for higher salaries (International Labour Organization, 2019) as the most talented seek jobs in government or the development sector (H. Hill, 2018). Outside Dili, work is scarce and youth are "young, poor and bored" (Ximenes & Rose, 2020, n.p), yet rural communities have re-established strong connections with land and ancestral customs, central to the traditional conception of a 'good life' (McWilliam, 2020a; Trindade & Barnes, 2013). Timorese people navigate 'customary modern' tensions between obligations to family and kin, and individual ambitions (McWilliam, 2020a). Communities throughout the global South share many of these structural realities, including familiar patterns of outward mobility, as people seek opportunities to work and study overseas.

Figure 11 shows the limited number of international scholarship places offered by three major ODA donors to Timorese applicants over a period of five years, and the lack of growth in places called for in SDG 4.B. Further, some donors report difficulties in filling scholarship quotas due to English language proficiency (Adam Smith International, 2017; Office of Development Effectiveness, 2014). The data show that hundreds of Timorese apply for international scholarship programmes annually, enrolling in English language training and attending scholarship information sessions. In 2017, for example, over 70 Australia Awards scholarship applicants were shortlisted from a much larger pool of applicants for 17 places in the 2018 recruitment round, while in 2019 three United States Timor-Leste scholars were selected from over 200 applicants (USTL, 2019).

Figure 11

Tertiary degree scholarship places awarded to Timorese students from programmes in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States 2015-2019.



(Source: Adam Smith International, 2017; Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.; USTL, 2019)

Timorese citizens are eligible for international scholarships from regional donors including Japan and Korea, but many are limited to postgraduate places and are reserved for public servants. In 2017 and 2018, the Australia Awards were limited to postgraduate places, which further restricted opportunities. In 2019, 54 students qualified for scholarships at universities in China (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 2019); more than the places offered by Australia, New Zealand, and the US combined. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many programmes being suspended, with scholars evacuated to Timor-Leste, and at the time of writing, the future of international scholarships here– and elsewhere in the global South– is uncertain, a topic pursued further in the conclusion.

9.5 Methodology – The Great is Found in the Small (Flyvbjerg, 1998)

Ethnographic data was collected by King between 2015 and 2017, and in subsequent online contact with project participants. Forsey and Pegrum contributed expertise and insight in the fields of education sociology and digital education and literacies respectively. The research was a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 2009), involving participatory research in Timor-Leste and interviews with scholarship recipients (referred to here as 'scholars') in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom. Data were collected via small group or individual semi-structured interviews in English with 22 international scholarship alumni, 10 current scholars, and 78 applicants, as well as local and expatriate teachers, scholarship recruiters and other education stakeholders. The primary field sites were the Liceu campus of UNTL, which hosts an Australian government-funded English Language Centre (ELC); the US State Department-funded *Uma Amerika* (America House); and a student-organised weekly English conversation club, where expatriate volunteers and scholarship alumni facilitate English speaking practice. The Xanana Reading Room, a library and internet hub supported by New Zealand government ODA, was another key site to meet scholarship applicants, alongside cafés, Wi-Fi 'hotspots', and shopping malls where young Timorese congregate and socialise (M. King et al., 2019).

The fieldwork required negotiation of challenges posed by the principal researcher being simultaneously teacher, volunteer, and participant across educational environments, and conscious of the power asymmetries inherent in qualitative interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), particularly when talking to scholarship applicants. Some participants saw the ethnographic interviews as an opportunity to practise their scholarship interview skills. One interviewee even recited his pre-prepared personal statement when asked why he wanted to apply for scholarships. It took time to 'open up' these conversations through less structured questioning, to explore individuals' motivations and practices. The longitudinal nature of the research has allowed contact with participants who have been scholarship applicants, then recipients, and are soon-to-be alumni.

The interviews and fieldnotes were transcribed, coded and collated thematically, and three individual stories were selected to provide a stronger grounding of the assertions in the generalised data and illustrating broader social themes (Miller, 2009). Seeking the 'great in the small' is a way of countering the often-depersonalising approach of interview-based studies that reduce the rich experience of individuals to a series of disembodied quotes from unknown 'others'. Introducing the people making up the stories within their specific social contexts (Forsey, 2010b), which is appropriate given the focus here on individual agency with Southern inflections. The stories portray three Timorese people at different moments in the scholarship cycle. This approach to data sharing allows a deeper exploration of practices and a means of exemplifying Southern agency in relating the stories of individuals working their way through the international scholarship apparatus, or not, as the case may be.

The applicant: Amelia - a young woman from Dili applying for international scholarships to study community development.

The scholar: Maria - a student on an undergraduate scholarship at a university in New Zealand.

The alumnus: Octavio - a senior education program manager for a foreign embassy in Dili. His most recent scholarship was a master's degree in educational leadership in Australia.

(All names are pseudonyms; quotes are reproduced verbatim).

9.6 Results

The Applicant

More than 100 young people regularly gathered at the English conversation club at UNTL. It proved an ideal site to meet students seeking scholarship opportunities and, in the words of many, to 'help develop my country'. Participants typically sought to fill job shortages in education, community development, medicine, and engineering, and they believed a scholarship would prepare them for success in these careers. The majority hailed from the rural districts, coming to Dili in order to complete secondary education and apply to university, a common initial trajectory owing to the lack of higher education institutions outside the capital (UNDP, 2018).

Amelia was one such student. She was applying for scholarships to study community development overseas and was focussed on improving her English language skills. She had taken and then taught English classes at Science of Life Systems (SOLS) 24/7, a Christian community organisation founded in Malaysia that provides non-formal English language, computing and leadership training to thousands of Timorese around the country. This inspired her to form a small local community organisation in the Dili suburbs with her friends, teaching English to local children in a rudimentary classroom furnished with donations from Australian schools.

She was primarily motivated to apply for scholarships by the experience of her sister, who was studying in Australia.

> … it's really motivated us, her siblings… to go out and get education, especially to go look for information about the scholarship because it's really important... Everything that we

> have in our house, she paid for that… she empowers many of the people especially in our environment, people are always looking at her and she makes the difference in our environment.

The phenomenon of 'scholarship families', where recipients support the applications of siblings and extended family, is increasingly common. The transformative financial effect of Amelia's sister's scholarship on her family's situation began even before she had returned from her studies, as she was able to remit part of her scholarship living allowance. Amelia's sister repaid the family investment by supporting her siblings' applications, while asserting her leadership status in the community.

Amelia's volunteer work helped build the kind of resumé scholarship recruiters seek. One experienced recruiter described a typical conversation with unsuccessful applicants:

> I'd just say: 'well, take this as a learning experience, change your profile for the interview panel next year.' 'Oh, *mana* ['older sister' in Tetum] maybe I'll get a job.' 'Oh, that's excellent.' 'Or maybe I'll enrol at UNTL.' 'That's also excellent, that will look good for the interview panel.'

This advice illustrates the kinds of creative improvisations required by scholarship applicants, looking to 'do good' in their community, showing their potential as change agents when returning from their studies, and simultaneously maximising the impact of efforts to 'look good' for interviewers.

Unlike other applicants interviewed, Amelia saw no point in enrolling at a local university and drew a stark comparison between the prospects of international and domestic graduates:

> OK, people who are studying at the university overseas, when they come of course they immediately get a job, immediately achieve what they want… to develop this country, they all achieve that. In Timor-Leste when they graduate, they get nothing, they just graduate from the school and stay home.

Amelia was prepared to stake her future on an international scholarship and had advanced through the early stages of the scholarship application process more than once. She was trying to learn from each setback and, like other applicants, was

attempting to meet the various application criteria, patiently working with the resources available to strengthen her case for selection.

The Scholar

Scholarship recipients often expressed enormous gratitude; to god for leading them through the scholarship process, to their family for moral and financial support, and to donors for the chance to study abroad. The excitement they felt at being given such an opportunity was usually palpable, although they spoke at the same time about the enormous culture shock and the difficulties posed by studying in a foreign culture, often in their fourth or fifth language. Changes were manifested in new clothes or an upgraded smartphone, as well as increased confidence, amplified by greater ease in using English. Scholars looked to capitalise on the chance they had been given, while finding themselves under considerable pressure to pass their courses while meeting obligations to donors and family.

Maria entered the research project in 2015 and had been shortlisted for three different scholarships without being chosen. She spoke English confidently, perhaps with more fluency than accuracy, which is common for Timorese students as they move between multiple languages in daily life, including Tetum (the national language, together with Portuguese), Bahasa Indonesia and English. Maria's childhood was spent in a town in the centre of the country, where she chatted in English with visiting foreigners before moving to Dili to finish high school. Her first taste of overseas travel had come when she was selected for a high school study tour to Japan, which inspired her to seek further opportunities.

When interviewed online in 2019, Maria had won an undergraduate scholarship to New Zealand and was embracing international student life. She missed her family and was in regular contact with her siblings and cousins via WhatsApp, supporting them with their scholarship applications. At university she discovered that some of her units with low enrolment numbers were only available online, so she had enrolled in online summer school units while back in Timor on holidays. Owning a laptop computer enabled her to move physically between Timor-Leste and New

Zealand, while studying digitally in a fixed online classroom, one of the new modalities of mobile learning emerging globally (Pegrum, 2019).

Maria was able to critically reflect on the economic benefits of development scholarships to the donor country, as ODA is paid back into the host economy as international student fees and imputed costs (A. Kent, 2018). She noted:

> …in a way of like helping the [host] country by come and study here and pay a lot of money… international students pay almost triple than what the domestic students pay, so I think that in a way helps the economics of the country.

This circular flow of ODA to Timor-Leste, then back into the donor economy, mirrors the patterns of circular mobility traced by scholars travelling to learn and then return. Maria's goal was to return and start a small business in Timor-Leste, but first she planned to work in a foreign embassy in Dili to save the necessary funds.

The Alumnus

Scholars who returned to Dili generally found employment in national government, foreign embassies, or international non-governmental organisations, giving them and their families social and cultural capital as well as financial security. Previous international education experience positions alumni favourably when further overseas study opportunities arise. Graduates must remain in Timor-Leste for two to five years to meet scholarship conditions and prevent a 'brain drain' of talent, and many had benefitted from multiple scholarships.

Octavio entered this project in 2017 when he was addressing a group of Timorese students at the Xanana Reading Room in central Dili. He was an alumnus from three programmes, having first trained as a priest at a Jesuit seminary in Singapore, then at university in the Philippines. He returned to Timor-Leste and taught in rural schools, before being awarded a postgraduate scholarship to study educational leadership in Australia. He assumed the role of change agent wholeheartedly, sharing his experiences and 'giving back' through teaching. Studying overseas had given Octavio a critical perspective on the Timorese education system.

He readily discussed the ideas of Paulo Freire (Freire, 2000), an educational philosopher often cited in Timor-Leste, whose revolutionary approaches to literacy development were adopted by the Timorese resistance during the Indonesian occupation (Sexton & da Costa, 2018). When asked about the shortcomings of the education system, he replied:

> I think in Timor-Leste context especially it comes from the lack of strong basic education. Timor-Leste, we come from very different historical background, so that's how our educational system is influenced by different historical points. For example, during the Portuguese time most people were not educated... And then during the Indonesian time they make it a law that every child should go to school, so that's where I got the opportunity. Although the curriculum at that time was a curriculum of the oppressor, curriculum of the colonial, but the good thing was that we had access to education.

He talked to the local students about their need for 'self-leadership', understanding that it was easy for young Timorese to stop aspiring to move beyond their current situation:

> I was telling students today because motivation - in the Timor context you need to have high motivation. Given that you are educated in the institutions in Timor-Leste with the lack of basic education facilities, how can you be yourself? How can you empower yourself outside of the classroom? I said you have these MOOCs, these Massive Open Online Courses, it takes special kind of motivation to go beyond what you learned in school.

Alongside open online learning, Octavio identified scholarships as a means of transcending the local higher education system. He demonstrates the contributions - as leaders and role models - that many alumni make upon their return. Notably, of the 22 scholarship alumni interviewed, 21 were employed in government, international organisations, or with foreign embassies (the single exception was the doctor, Ines, whose story is related in Chapter 8). However, this path is not guaranteed, as a scholarship alumni association administrator explained, because these kinds of career opportunities are no longer plentiful.

9.7 Discussion

The experiences of these individuals, striving to gain and exercise power to transform their life possibilities, present three contrasting examples of Southern agency in practice. Octavio has made the most of multiple scholarships and now wants to inspire others, leading by example to show that social and physical mobility is possible despite structural constraints, while Maria is looking to maximise the advantages of her scholarship before she returns to Dili. But it is Amelia, with her determined focus, demonstrating considerable patience and resilience in undergoing the annual cycle of scholarship application rounds and creating the right kind of applicant profile, whose story best represents the experience for so many people looking to harness the power of international scholarships. The following themes provide a framework for exploring Southern agency as shaped through individual interactions with international scholarship programs.

Infrastructure

Educational infrastructure is a key shaper of individual decisions and the motivations behind them. Local higher education institutions were disparaged by many participants for failing to prepare graduates for the world of work, and many sought to augment their education at grassroots institutions such as SOLS, the English conversation club, and Amelia's local community organisation. The latter two represent opportunities created by the applicants themselves, despite resource constraints. They offer powerful examples of Southern agency in practice. Amelia's organisation is the product of her efforts to improve life in her community and enhance her scholarship CV, a mix of motivations promoting strategies benefitting both herself and her community, reconciling customary modern tensions within one activity.

ODA-funded internet access hubs such as the Xanana Reading Room and the *Uma Amerika* are key sites of access to educational resources and scholarship information; they are populated with young people meeting, waiting for their internet bookings, studying, and sharing information about upcoming application deadlines.

The Catholic church remains a major structurating force in Timor-Leste, providing formal school education to many, while Octavio's scholarship journey via the seminary is a path shared by at least two of the male alumni interviewed. China has emerged as a scholarship provider, building on its historic ties and public diplomacy (Barreto Soares, 2019), and is providing new scholarship options for individuals. On balance, the interacting effects of the limited number of places offered annually, the growing competition among young people entering post-secondary education seeking those places, and the competition from alumni from other programmes, significantly limit the chances of success for many applicants, despite their considerable efforts.

FAMILY

Family and kinship groups are crucial supportive units for applicants. 'Scholarship families' provide financial, moral and other forms of support through the scholarship cycle, empowering scholars to reach their academic and social aspirations. Amelia's sister remitted part of her scholarship stipend to repay the investment in her education even while she was studying, while Maria helped family members with their applications, attempting to diffuse power and privilege among her family network, sharing her insights and experience. Timorese applicants, scholars and alumni inhabit a customary modernity, seeking to fulfil individual life goals while meeting wider obligations to family and kin, and contributing to a burgeoning 'customary economy' (Trindade & Barnes, 2013) which sustains the broader Timorese social system, however unevenly.

Success in gaining a scholarship is almost impossible without family support, and as individuals gain power, they also confer power on the wider family group, via financial gain and standing in the community, as well as sharing insights into the application process that benefit other family members. Recent research by a Timorese scholar concluded that scholarship recipients are overwhelmingly from middle class families, often with a parent working in government, and that international scholarships reinforce class divisions in Timorese society (Simões, 2020). Research

from across the pacific region notes that wealthier families reproduce power by supporting multiple scholarship recipients (Barbara et al., 2015).

LITERACIES

The various literacies applicants look to develop as part of meeting scholarship requirements are key to the exercise of Southern agency in attempts to advance through the scholarship process. Language 'speaks us' (Deeds Ermarth, 2011), and linguistic ability is a key determinant of individual success in many parts of the Global South. English literacy requirements for scholarship application success are generally tied to the Academic IELTS exam, described by one educator interviewed for this project as a "blunt tool" for measuring applicants' English language proficiency. It acts as a significant barrier to scholarship success, leading applicants to both seek and create opportunities to improve their English through non-formal means.

Octavio's critique of the Timorese higher education system infers that local graduates lack critical literacies, a result of the residual 'hidden curriculum' which continues to constrain the system and the students within it. By contrast, Maria's reflection on the circular flow of scholarship ODA back to donors suggests she has developed some critical insight into the system during her time overseas.

Some participants accessed online learning outside formal education, with Maria studying online and Octavio promoting open online courses as an alternative to traditional education, developing digital literacies on a range of devices. Despite the infrastructural constraints of limited hardware access and unreliable internet connectivity, a growing number of students are studying online for free or at low cost via local Wi-Fi hubs and mobile devices (M. King et al., 2019) as they develop an interconnected suite of literacies.

Colonization

The colonial legacy is a deeply significant characteristic of Southern agency, and the occupation of Timor-Leste by Portugal and Indonesia has had an indelible impact on the country, including its education system. Scholarships offer an opportunity to escape the hidden curriculum and travel outside the structural constraints of the local education system, to institutions embodying their own various agendas communicated in no small part via the curriculum. Alumni often return to Dili to work in administrative roles in government or embassies, drawn to the higher salaries and attendant social capital, as well as the opportunity these jobs offer to contribute to national development. They also find well-paid jobs with international development organisations, inviting comparison to wider critiques of the development encounter (Escobar, 1994). Scholarship graduates are offered a chance to for the creative production of selfhood, part of the promise of international education (Marginson, 2014) and education more broadly (Bingham, 2001) however this can often lead to the re-production of social inequalities and normed roles within post-colonial communities.

The same scholarships can also exacerbate North-South disparities in higher education, offering scholars the chance to study overseas and return acculturated to Northern epistemologies, to the exclusion of indigenous knowledge systems. Southern universities remain at the global periphery, net consumers of knowledge (Connell, 2017), and international scholarships reinforce the message that Timorese must travel to a 'developed' country to access quality education. Amelia's and Octavio's criticisms of the local university system may be valid, but the limited number of international scholarship places provides no practicable alternative for the thousands of Timorese graduating from the secondary school system each year who will never receive what many would deem to be an adequate formal education.

In summary, international scholarships provide important opportunities for recipients to transform themselves and achieve their aspirations, allowing them to 'give back' to their country. For those fortunate enough to win a place, they confer the chance to travel, learn and return with considerable power to exercise in local society. However, applicants are constrained by a range of forces including poor local

education infrastructure and limited scholarship places, a lack of literacies required to meet entry requirements, and an inherent advantage to those in middle class scholarship families. These factors, in addition to the tendency for alumni to take work in local government, foreign embassies and the development industry, raise further questions about the efficacy and efficiency of international scholarships as a means of ODA distribution. Investigating Southern agency in this context reveals the creative, strategic, but so often unsuccessful practices enacted by those looking to transform their lives through international education.

9.8 Considerations for post-Covid international education interventions.

International education has undergone seismic changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Marginson, 2020). In Australia, the 'Partnerships for Recovery' report (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020) notes the effects on progress toward the SDGs, and outlines plans to redistribute ODA to support neighbours such as Timor-Leste. The longer-term impact on scholarships is unclear, and even before the pandemic, global education ODA had stagnated since 2010 (UNESCO, 2019). Alternative approaches such as investment in local higher education adopted by the Austrian government, highlighted earlier, may not achieve the same donor soft power goals, nor provide the transformative overseas student experiences and positive alumni impressions, but they suggest the potential for future quality education interventions at scale. Investing in educational institutions outside Dili could improve local capacity in health and agriculture (H. Hill, 2018), and ODA could support initiatives fostering the study of indigenous knowledge, to redress historical imbalances in Southern higher education systems (Connell, 2017).

With the global growth in online higher education provision, which escalated considerably as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (McKie, 2020)– notwithstanding the limitations of hastily enacted and often poorly pedagogically conceived Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020)– digital education could augment or replace face-to-face delivery. Examples include international distance scholarships (Breines et al., 2019), North-South online knowledge exchanges

(Abrahamse et al., 2015) and other virtual exchange programs (Helm et al., 2020). Online higher education has potential at scale in the global South (Laurillard & Kennedy, 2017) together with blended learning approaches (M. King, Luan, et al., 2018), and while these alternatives will not entirely replace scholarship programmes, they can widen access to quality higher education and promote social mobility without requiring intercontinental mobility. Ultimately these opportunities for knowledge exchange could contribute significantly to an ecosystem of knowledges proposed by Santos (2016).

9.9 Conclusion

International scholarships offer transformative educational opportunities while creating or reinforcing stark power asymmetries, for which Southern agency offers a useful analytical tool. It is characterised by structured, cultured decision making by individuals who are shaped by the opportunities and limitations offered through local infrastructure, the influence of family and kin, the development of personal literacies, and the enduring impact of colonialism and post-colonial reality. For individuals in Southern countries such as Timor-Leste, scholarships are a ticket to social mobility, which in many instances are linked to physical mobility (Forsey, 2015b) and increasingly digital mobility (Pegrum, 2019). Applicants need to present the kind of self-image recruiters seek, often requiring tremendous patience and resilience. Scholars look to maximise the benefits of a transformative educational experience and repay the investment made in them. In becoming change agents and ‘giving back’, alumni often reproduce administrative roles comparable to the colonial era.

As donor states look to redistribute ODA in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, international scholarships may prove unsustainable, and there is evidence of innovative ways of delivering assistance by reprioritising local university capacity development and digital education interventions adapted to the social and infrastructural realities of the global South. Recognising the limitations and perilous positive assumptions of international scholarships while exploring more scalable alternative interventions may open up quality educational opportunities for

increasing numbers of students. Adopting a Southern perspective on international scholarships allows a deeper appreciation of the practices of individuals who aspire to these opportunities and their motivations, highlighting the considerable barriers they face and the creative strategies they enact in attempting to overcome them.

PART 3

Chapter 10. Discussion and conclusion

10.1 Introduction

The overarching aim of the preceding chapters of this thesis was to investigate the proposition that MOOCs and OERs can improve the quality of education in Timor-Leste. The results presented suggest there is both potential and appetite for open online learning to augment the existing Timorese higher education system, which continues to be constrained by issues including access, relevance and overall quality, and remains bound by structures which are a legacy of colonial power.

The central research question directing this project was:

- *How do people in Timor-Leste navigate the forces shaping their participation in higher education opportunities through open online learning?*

Part 2 of this thesis began with a review of the literature detailing the problems and potential of adopting MOOCs and OERs in the global South, then observing how these factors impacted opportunities for people in Dili to learn online. Early evidence of groups blending face-to-face learning with MOOCs and OERs prompted an attempt to test this proposition, with roundly positive results. The concept of Southern agency was developed through the later chapters of this thesis as a means of centring the ethnographic description and analysis on the individuals working to improve their lives through education. This included people who had managed to successfully power their trajectory to social mobility through physical mobility, travelling to esteemed universities in the global North; others who had used open online learning in various guises, including MOOCs, to study; and others still who had attempted and failed to learn via the internet. The research portrayed individuals often using a system that is using them, adopting creative, sometimes clandestine practices to get online and learn, and to compete for the limited pool of international scholarship places that attract many applicants each year. Southern agency provides a tool for analysing the quotidian yet often important structured, cultured choices and decisions these individuals make, situating their rationales in the particular structuring conditions

which reproduce colonial matrices of power and continue to shape postcolonial Timor-Leste, some 20 years after independence.

This thesis concludes with a summary of the contributions to the academic literature made by each of the papers comprising Chapters 5-9, and links each back to its implications for the relevant target in SDG 4 outlined in Chapter 1. It then proposes three key areas for future research: the emerging role of MOOCs and OERs in Timor-Leste; the potential for blended MOOCs and other innovative open online learning models to improve access to quality education throughout the global South; and further exploration of the form of return mobility peculiar to the experience of international scholarship students as they learn and return to their home countries. This chapter – and thesis – concludes with my reflections on open online learning in Timor-Leste, the role of Southern agency, and the possible future possibilities in this field.

10.2 Contributions to the literature

Paper 1, which appears as Chapter 5 in this thesis and is entitled 'MOOCs and OER in the global South: Problems and potential' (M. King et al., 2018), addresses the first guiding research question, with its two sub-questions: *What are the key problems restricting the uses of MOOCs and OERs for learners in the global South? What potential exists for MOOCs and OERs to provide educational opportunities for these learners?* The paper identified five key themes emerging from the literature. Access to a stable internet connection and ICT device; the interdependent set of literacies learners need to engage in these experiences; the exposure to new, often unfamiliar pedagogical approaches; and the importance of context of content are each explored, before the final issue of North-South knowledge imbalances is introduced. The theme of the global eduscape privileging knowledge produced in the North over the South within the international flows of knowledge, policies and practices, remains a constant throughout the remainder of the thesis.

This systematic review is among the first of its kind to review published research into MOOCs and OER in the global South in the academic literature, and since

2018 has over 60 citations according to Google Scholar. The paper is referenced in the introduction to a major volume on MOOCs and OERs in the global South (Zhang et al. 2019), and studies of open online learning practices in countries as diverse as India (Venkatamaran & Prabhakar, 2019), Ghana (Loglo & Zawacki-Richter, 2019), Brazil (Floss et al., 2021) and Tunisia (Taziri & Akkari, 2022).

One of the key contributions of this paper is to establish the research 'gap': a lack of studies focussing on the individual would-be learners from the global South who could benefit from the proliferation of open online resources. It links this phenomenon with the top/down, North/South dynamic imbalance in the delivery of many international development assistance projects (Cornwall, 2006) and the importance of participatory, multilateral approaches to knowledge exchange (Contreras & Roudbari, 2021). Since the publication of this chapter, a small number of qualitative studies have been published in the area of open online learning in the global South. One study used learner survey data to report the impressions of a group of learners from South American countries on a tropical disease research MOOC (Launois et al., 2019), while another used a mixed methods approach to analysing learner responses to a MOOC on Covid-19 treatment for graduate doctors in Indonesia (Findyartini et al., 2021). Clearly there is scope for further qualitative research on open online learning throughout the global South.

Paper 2 (Chapter 6); 'Doing MOOCs in Dili: Studying learner behaviour in a country of the global South' (M. King et al., 2019), addresses the research question: *How do these problems and potential manifest themselves in Timor-Leste?* This paper is unique in exploring these emergent themes in a specific Southern context, and provides evidence of the practical barriers to internet access, as well as the growth of opportunities via affordable mobile ICTs, Wi-Fi hotspots and internet hubs. It provides an account of the complex, plurilingual nature of language skills in Timor-Leste, as individuals use a range of endogenous and exogenous languages in different life roles, and the challenges of developing digital and critical literacies in an environment with limited access to ICTs and a persistent 'copy paste' academic culture respectively. Discussing the challenges of introducing learners to new pedagogical formats, this paper makes an important conclusion that blending MOOCs and OERs with facilitated,

face-to-face meetings within internet access hubs, can assist in scaffolding these early online learning experiences, as evidenced by the research in Paper 3 (Chapter 7; M. King, Luan, et al., 2018). Considering the limits of the context of content, this paper notes that there had been no MOOCs or OERs designed specifically for a Timorese context at the time of publication, although this has since changed (see section 10.3 below). A key advantage of blending online content identified in Paper 2 was that it provided opportunities to discuss how new knowledge might apply to Timorese contexts. Addressing the final theme of North-South imbalances of knowledge flow, this paper calls for greater diversity of academic voices in MOOCs and OERs, to redress these imbalances and provide an opportunity for Timor-Leste, as part of the global South – the 'empire'– to 'MOOC back'.

These first two papers have implications for SDG 4.3: "By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (United Nations, 2015, p.21). The first paper reveals the structural barriers to providing access to open online learning throughout the global South and the potential for learners in these communities to negotiate these barriers and learn online, while the second examines these barriers as they apply to practices of MOOCs specifically in a Timorese context. While these papers present evidence of engagement with various forms of open online learning, it is important to point out the lingering influence of technological solutionism and the need to decolonise educational technologies (Traxler, forthcoming). Bayne et al. (2021) point out that online learning systems create huge quantities for data for big tech firms to exploit, and that the growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in educational technology can "reinforce and reproduce existing social, economic, racial and gender biases" (p.5). To counter these effects, they propose that "[c]ommunity-led participatory research, development and future-making strategies can empower educational institutions to imagine, describe and build their own preferable futures for education with technology" (Bayne et al., 2021, p.6). For open online learning to aid Timor-Leste's progress towards SDG 4.3, and other targets within Goal 4, such grassroots strategies need to be adopted, while recognising that MOOCs and OERs are not the sole means of achieving progress (McGreal, 2017).

Paper 3 (Chapter 7) 'Experiences of Timorese language teachers in a blended Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for Continuing Professional Development (CPD)' (M. King, Luan, et al., 2018) poses the question: *What forms of support most effectively help Timorese engage with open online learning?* It reports the results of blending a British Council English language teacher CPD MOOC hosted on the FutureLearn platform with weekly face-to-face study meets, detailing the benefits and challenges to this approach. This paper is the first study of blended open online learning conducted in Timor-Leste, adopting the principles of ethnographic action research (EAR) and co-authored with two blended course teacher-participants. The results provide unique insights into Timorese learners' experience of a MOOC in a peer-to-peer professional development setting.

The benefits identified, including access to quality resources, the opportunity to collaborate with peers and reflect on work practice, as well as motivation to improve both professional practice and English language proficiency, reflect the findings of studies in India (Cutrell et al., 2015), Indonesia (Firmansyah & Timmis, 2016), South Africa (Jaffer et al., 2017), and throughout the global South (Marrinan et al., 2015). The challenges of internet access and difficulties navigating resource architecture reflect other studies, but further barriers were identified, including participant time constraints (see also Arinto, 2016; Garrido et al., 2016) and the additional frustration experienced by learners willing to pay for a course upgrade, but restricted by local credit card merchant restrictions.

Key conclusions from this paper are that the approach of blending open online course content with regular face-to-face discussion can help improve learner engagement, and that a number of the barriers to learning online can be negotiated by blending facilitated study meets to encourage peer-to-peer collaboration. This can help scaffold participant literacy development, acculturate participants to a new pedagogical format, and foster the contextualisation of course content to specific classroom conditions, while making use of spaces with more reliable internet connectivity.

Paper 3 has also been cited in over 20 times since its publication in 2018, including as part of the evidence grounding other studies of blending MOOCs and OERs with in-person contact in teacher education in Pakistan (Impedovo & Malik, 2019), Turkey (Utku Bilici & Çetin Köroğlu, 2022), Mexico (León González, 2020) and to support the proposition that such approaches can improve teaching quality globally (Highman & Kennedy, 2021).

The third paper relates most closely to SDG 4.C: "By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states" (United Nations, 2015, p.22). The applications of blended open online learning in Teacher Professional Development (TPD) extend to training student teachers, and fostering the creation of local communities of practice that can support continuous TPD. Within the studies cited above, Impedovo and Malik (2019) blended open online resources with teacher educators, a 'train the trainers' intervention which blended TPD MOOCs with local face-to-face study groups. At scale, this could generate a 'digital multiplier' to help train the estimated 69 million teachers needed globally by 2030 (Laurillard & Kennedy, 2019).

Paper 4 (Chapter 8), 'Southern agency and digital education: An ethnography of open online learning in Dili, Timor-Leste' (M. King et al., 2019) addresses the research question: *How have Timorese individuals successfully used MOOCs and other open online courses to achieve educational goals?* It introduces the key concept of Southern agency through portraits of three project participants with prior experience of open online learning. These stories present individuals aspiring to improve their lives, who have used MOOCs and OERs to access educational opportunities. This paper is the first of its kind to explore the phenomenon of individuals identifying online learning resources as having utility to help them study a subject with little or no representation in the local higher education system, such as Ines's medicine professional development, or in Rosa's case her belief that resources produced outside Timor-Leste are inherently better quality. Vasco engaged with resources

designed to improve English language proficiency, as part of preparation for the IELTS exam, helping him to achieve the scores he required to win a scholarship place at one of the world's most prestigious universities.

Southern agency is a unique contribution to the study of practice in the global South, and has utility as an analytical tool in combination with ethnographic methods, to explore the lived experience of people in the global South. It encourages a focus on the structured, cultured choices and decisions individuals make and the motivations behind them as they attempt to accrue social capital through education. In the context of open online learning, a number of themes are educed; the limitations of local infrastructure and the creative improvisations people adopt to navigate these constraints; the importance of family and wider kinship groups to support individuals and shape their decisions; the range of literacies these individuals need to develop and draw upon to progress through the education system; and finally, the enduring colonial legacy. This last theme picks up the thread of North-South power imbalances first identified in the opening published paper. Coloniality permeates all of the preceding themes, structurating action, and reproducing colonial-era power structures throughout Timorese society and its eduscape. Southern agency foregrounds these structured, cultured individual actions, maintaining the focus of research on these learners, investigating their practices and offering a novel contribution to the academic literature.

This paper relates most closely to SDG 4.5, to "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable" by 2029 (United Nations, 2015, p.21). When considering higher education in Timor-Leste, it is clear that much remains to be done to eliminate the inequalities that persist in access to open online education, reflecting the persistent issues in accessing quality, relevant bricks-and-mortar education (Beck, 2022; Burns, 2017; H. Hill, 2018; UNESCO, 2014c). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the stories chosen demonstrate examples of students successfully engaging with online resources, and the positive assumptions of technology in education need to be balanced against the reality illustrated through the prologue to Chapter 8, describing the experience of students in the *Parque 5 de Maio* Wi-Fi hotspot, waiting in the

afternoon heat for web pages to load. Notably this research was conducted in Dili, which has much improved internet connectivity since 2012. Outside the capital, services are less reliable and internet hubs are far less accessible. It is unlikely that a project such as this could have been conducted in the more remote districts of Timor-Leste, which speaks to the clear and ongoing educational disparities which technology alone cannot solve, and may in fact exacerbate. The planned submarine fibre optic cable linking Timor-Leste with northern Australia (Martins, 2022) should offer more reliable internet connectivity, allowing learners across the country to access quality education online, but this requires a participatory, grassroots approach to codesigning more socially inclusive resources (Altimay et al., 2016; Arinto et al., 2017).

Finally, Paper 5 (Chapter 9), 'International scholarships and Southern agency: An ethnography of alumni, scholars, and applicants' (M. King et al., 2021), employs Southern agency to examine the experiences of three Timorese at different stages of their higher education journey, united by their desire to pursue international scholarships. The research question addressed here is: What motivates people to apply for international scholarships and what do they gain from them? Further, what does this reveal about international education interventions from a Southern perspective especially in a post-Covid world? The paper reveals the personal inspirations framing their aspirations, the choices and decisions and the motivations behind them. It recounts the experiences of scholarship applicant Amelia, working to 'do good' to 'look good' and present the kind of profile scholarship recruiters seek. The currently enrolled international scholar, Maria – who had previously failed in multiple rounds of applications – feels her persistence has been rewarded, giving her extra motivation to maximise the opportunity. The payoff for this effort is clear for alumni such as Octavio, who historically have been preferred for lucrative employment in national government and the aid sector, giving them access to a higher standard of living and social capital, although there is evidence these positions are no longer guaranteed.

In Paper 5 the same themes educed in Paper 4 are here used to explore the practices of scholarship applicants, recipients and alumni. Participants look to leverage the limited opportunities offered by local educational infrastructure,

supported by family and kin while often under a moral obligation to repay the investment in their education, similar to the findings of an ethnographic study of scholarship students in Rwanda (Baxter, 2019). The suite of interdependent literacies required to demonstrate academic and linguistic competence as a condition of entry, embodied in the ‘blunt’ recruitment tool of the IELTS and other scholarship entrance examinations, requires applicants to transcend the structural limitations imposed by the ‘hidden curriculum’ permeating the education system, while alumni return with a set of skills enabling them to compete for good jobs and further scholarship opportunities. The paper notes that the colonial experience and the ongoing legacy of colonial power structures reproduced within post-colonial societies is a thread linking these experiences, reproducing traditional colonial-era roles in government, reinforcing the coloniality of these structures.

Paper 5 contributes to the small body of critical examinations of international scholarship programs published in the last 10 years (Campbell & Mawer, 2019; A. Kent, 2018; Lowe & Kent, 2017; Mawdsley, 2012) to counter hagiographic reports of scholarship efficacy, often produced by the scholarship programs themselves. Notably, it highlights the growing number of applicants in Timor-Leste applying for a limited quantity of scholarship places, and the return of recent alumni to a shrinking number of graduate-level positions, further constraining the opportunities available to Timorese people investing considerable effort and finances in applying for these opportunities. The paper concludes by recommending greater ODA investment in improving the quality of local higher education in Timor-Leste, including through the innovative use of ICTs and open online learning, with important implications for the post-COVID eduscape.

This paper aligns most closely with SDG 4.B, to “substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education” by 2020 (United Nations, 2015, p.21). As Paper 5 points out, this deadline has passed without the substantial growth of international scholarship places specified by the target since 2015, while application numbers are high. Questions must be asked of the merit of pursuing SDG 4.B given concerns that

these opportunities cannot fully meet student demand and that they reinforce socioeconomic stratification within the recipient countries (Barbara et al., 2015; Simões, 2020). The paper concludes that investing ODA in the Timorese education system, including via online education, would return greater benefits to all Timorese students than scholarships for select individuals, although without the attendant benefits to donor country universities.

The collective contributions these papers make to the academic literature relate to Timor-Leste and some of the conclusions reached appear to have transferability to other Southern contexts. However, it is worth stressing that the 'South' is not a homogenous grouping of communities. Mignolo and Walsh (2018), in discussing the relational nature of knowledge in and between communities, point out that in conceptualising decoloniality their aim is not to apply "abstract universals" (p.1). Similarly, de Sousa Santos (2016), in proposing an ecological epistemological model, advocates intercultural translation, recognising a diverse global ecosystem of knowledges. By extension, the experiences of the project participants in Timor-Leste and the knowledge produced through this thesis are framed in terms of the colonial legacy and its post-colonial realities, but there are limits to the transferability of these findings to all countries of the global South. These are heterogenous communities and more comparative studies would shed light on the similarities and important differences in the experiences of individuals in other contexts, but this project focussed on the capital city of one country in the global South. Emerging research into online teaching and learning practices throughout the South provides points of comparison, and will provide further evidence for comparison as the field develops.

10.3 Directions for future study

At least three areas of enquiry present as avenues for further research arising from this thesis. The first is the emerging role of MOOCs and OERs as means of providing quality education at scale in Timor-Leste. Since the inception of this project, a number of pilot studies have tested the potential for open online learning. A recent example

is the *Matenek* project, a set of online professional development resources for Timorese teachers. According to the project report:

> Matenek uses mobile technology to increase teachers' access to lesson plans, curricular resources, and micro-learning professional development content over their smartphones. By using Matenek, teachers are supported to prepare for class whether through instructions on how to make materials or by learning related content (Catalpa International Ltd., 2019, p.7).

The project adopted principles of human-centred design (HCD) and was codesigned with Timorese teachers (Catalpa International Ltd., 2019) using participatory models of resource design championed in other Southern contexts (Gallagher, 2019). It promoted social inclusion to avoid the reproduction of knowledge imbalances (Arinto et al., 2017), and adopted an online delivery platform designed for low internet bandwidth scenarios, similar to other projects in the global South (Murugesan et al., 2017; Rea & Gopalan, 2021). The program's evaluation concluded that teachers who used the resources were better prepared, school leaders were better able to support teachers' professional development, and the education sector as a whole became more aware of the value of using ICTs as part of lesson preparation. *Matenek* also demonstrates how open online resources can help Timor-Leste progress towards SDG 4.C, increasing the supply of qualified teachers.

Another project involves the production of a human rights education course as a curated selection of OERs for university students and lecturers at UNTL, entitled 'An Introduction to Human Rights in Southeast Asia'. According to the course website, the course covers "the basic notions of human rights studies, plus a selection of subjects related to the most pressing human rights issues in Timor-Leste" (Global Campus of Human Rights, n.d.). It consists of open textbook chapters, Microsoft PowerPoint slide decks and video lectures, translated and subtitled in Tetum or Indonesian, which can be accessed separately or completed as an open course designed to be blended with face-to-face discussion. The quality of resources is generally high, and the use of OER elements aggregated in a MOOC-style format follows other innovations in the field (Boga & McGreal, 2014; Czerniewicz et al., 2017;

McGreal, 2017; Rea & Gopalan, 2021), however some of the video content is over 30 minutes long, making it difficult to watch without access to a stable internet connection and power supply. Another major issue is that while there are a diverse range of subject matter experts from across the region and beyond presenting the course videos, there is a distinct lack of Timorese academic voices in the resources.

Further ethnographic investigation of these projects would help inform future projects employing open online learning resources in Timor-Leste, to develop more resources for and codesigned with secondary and university educators, which might begin to decolonise Timorese knowledge production and help break the reproduction of the hidden curriculum. Paulo Freire's educational philosophy has been adopted in various forms since the early resistance to Indonesian occupation (Urban et al., 2021) and has been used to some effect in adult literacy programs in the post-independence era (Boughton, 2010; Urban & von Linsingen, 2018). Open online learning resources drawing on this Freirean heritage could contribute to teacher training and literacy development in endogenous languages.

Another potential future set of online resources could draw upon the *Chega!* Report into the history of the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste. The final report is the major historical account of this period, contributing to truth and reconciliation efforts in the independent Timor-Leste (CAVR, 2013). However, a report ten years after publication concluded that in spite of efforts to socialise the report's contents, including the production of a comic strip for younger learners, it is not widely embedded in the school curriculum, and the report itself is 'neglected' (A. Kent et al., 2016). Assembling educational content, including OER archival video footage and summaries of the report content, would make the knowledge accessible in a novel format which could encourage a critical perspective and engagement with Timor-Leste's past.

A second focus for further research involves further investigating the potential to blend online educational resources with face-to-face study meetings. As mentioned in section 10.2 above, there is a growing field of research into blended open online

learning in Southern contexts, and teacher professional development (TPD) is one particularly promising area. A report entitled *Supporting teachers with mobile technology: Lessons drawn from UNESCO projects in Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and Senegal* (UNESCO, 2017) points out that: teachers in these countries generally already have access to mobile ICTs; they already know how to use them; mobile internet coverage is improving globally; mobile devices facilitate dynamic communication; and they offer flexible learning conditions. Research by Kennedy and Laurillard (2019) demonstrates that blending TPD MOOCs with face-to-face contact in contexts of mass displacement such as refugee camps in Lebanon can deliver meaningful professional development at scale. These courses are also codesigned with teachers, helping to make the resources sustainable and relevant to specific challenges presented by this context.

Other innovations in blending online and in person education referred to in Chapter 9 represent emerging innovative practices which leverage the affordances of these modes of delivery, while creating opportunities to decolonise both the knowledge created and the pedagogy behind it. Emerging examples of new educational approaches using technology in novel ways, include international virtual exchanges (Abrahamse et al., 2015; Helm, 2019), international distance scholarships (Breines et al., 2019) and other forms of collaborative online international learning (COIL) (Rubin, 2020) noted in Chapter 9. Open and digital scholarship among academics such as the Open Scholars Network in Rwanda (Nkuyubwatsi et al., 2015), and inter-university Open Education Practices (Patru & Venkatamaran, 2016) outlined in Chapter 5, all present novel approaches to offering some of the benefits of international study without requiring international mobility. There is tremendous scope for flexibility beyond basic one-way content delivery, allowing teachers and learners to use technology in ways which suit their needs and circumstances, opening up opportunities to promote and sustain an ecosystem of knowledges and pedagogies. Importantly, these emerging collaborative teaching and learning formats promote greater social inclusion (Arinto et al., 2017).

A third and area for future research relates to international scholarships in the global South and the circular patterns of scholar mobility they produce, which might

be termed 'boomerang mobility'. A point first raised in Chapter 9 regards the conditional, conscribed form of mobility which international scholarships offer to students of the global South. They are awarded the opportunity to travel overseas, under the proviso that they remain in their home country for a predetermined period (usually 3-5 years) upon graduation. This form of structuration links to wider cyclical movements of international aid, referred to previously as 'boomerang aid' (Anderson, 2012), and goes to the heart of the gift exchange dynamic between ODA donors and recipients (da Silva, 2008; Mawdsley, 2012). Previous ethnographic studies in the sociology of education have investigated 'Learning to Labour' (Willis, 1977), 'Learning to Leave' (Corbett, 2007) and 'Learning to Stay' (Forsey, 2015b). This new research would extend the aphorism through enquiry into the phenomenon of *learning to return*.

Boomerang mobility has parallels in studies of international circular mobility (S. J. Clark et al., 2007; Weber & Saarela, 2019), including Timorese labour migrants (McWilliam, 2012, 2020b), and research into international scholarship students navigating the competing expectations of stakeholders, including scholars, their family and scholarship providers (Baxter, 2019). Research has focussed on the individual production of selfhood through international student mobility (Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2016), while others have theorised that international scholarship students create a form of 'metastability' as they negotiate enormous, new complexity (Gallagher, 2018). There is considerable scope for further ethnographic research into the experiences of scholarship students, which would help ODA donors and other scholarship providers better understand the challenges students from the global South face and the temporally and geographically constrained patterns of mobility they undertake in order to accrue social, financial and mobility capital.

The three areas could all be investigated using decolonised methods of inquiry, primarily through research co-design, collaborating with students, lecturers and administrators, and democratising the research process and involving participants throughout. There is ample scope for applications of Southern agency to further investigate the experiences of people in the global South seeking to achieve their aspirations through education. Ethnographic methods provide a set of tools for

researching participant experience and its efficacy, while Southern agency offers a means of interpreting ethnographic data, putting participating individuals at the centre of the research, giving them agency over research decisions. Future projects need to embrace decolonised research methods, and in ethnographic studies of open online learning there are clear opportunities to involve participants more deeply in research as active co-creators of new knowledge, as well as involving them in the design of open online educational resources, adapting content and pedagogic approaches to learner contexts.

10.4 Concluding remarks

Across the 7-year development of this thesis major events have transformed the global eduscape, including countries of the global South such as Timor-Leste. Covid-19 has pushed the online education agenda to the forefront of contemporary education debate, and a backlash against Emergency Remote Teaching is inevitable, particularly when these rapid online responses often produced teaching and learning experiences contrary to accepted good practice (Highman & Kennedy, 2021).

Globally, the United Nations reports that 11 years of progress towards SDG 4 has been undone by the Covid-19 pandemic, while approximately two thirds of Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) have decreased spending on education during the pandemic (United Nations, 2021). Online learning offers one opportunity to make up some of these losses, particularly in higher education (Ghanem, 2020). In Timor-Leste the impact of the pandemic has combined with recent natural disasters, political turmoil and oil price fluctuations to add considerable socio-political instability (Gunn, 2021). The proposed government recovery plan has committed to maintaining education spending levels, while recommending incremental annual funding increases (República Democrática de Timor-Leste, 2020), but it remains to be seen if this recommendation will be implemented. To help regain the ground lost, quality impactful education projects will need to be implemented, and open online learning through MOOCs and OERs offer one means of doing this at scale.

In the face of these challenges, open online learning has emerged as a potential solution to the growing global skills shortage. Reynolds et al. (2020) predict that in the near future more than half of learners on MOOCs will be from the global South, and that "[t]he primary focus areas of MOOCs in 2040 will target adult learners in the workforce with opportunities for professional development and job reskilling and upskilling" (p.345). Over the past 10 years a number of projects have leveraged this potential for professional development to be facilitated through MOOCs and OERs throughout the global South (Floss et al., 2021; Garrido et al., 2016; Launois et al., 2019). Through learning from the successes and challenges of pioneering projects such as the *Matenek* TPD resources in Timor-Leste, there are clear opportunities to codesign open online resources for myriad work contexts, from healthcare to agriculture and academic research.

As in other countries of the global South, the colonial past and its present impact cannot be ignored. Timorese politician and academic Fideles Magalhães, in reflecting on his country's history and socioeconomic development, writes:

> Timor-Leste is a country in the making that has many potential and specific challenges. While it is true that many of our problems cannot be solved instantly, a great number of them are the result of our history (Magalhães, 2015, p. 39).

This challenge of looking to improve conditions for the future whilst attempting to resolve issues from the past is a task faced daily by Timorese people, which fundamentally shapes their actions. Ortner (1989, p.193) concludes that "a theory of practice is a theory of history. It is a theory of how social beings, with their diverse motives and their diverse intentions, make and transform the world in which they live". The individuals in this project grapple with the structural inheritance of colonialism in the process of contributing to a Timor-Leste of their making, committed to creating a successful, secure future for themselves and their communities.

When studying practice, it is easy to focus on the negative impacts of structure on individual agency. In the documentary film *Sociology is a Martial Art* (Carles, 2001) Pierre Bourdieu describes the worldview of the sociologist as: "*triste, deterministe, pessimiste*" (in French, 'sad, determinist, pessimist') but, accepting the often-negative

associations of researching practice, Southern agency also looks to highlight the creative and discursive in people's actions, what Deeds Ermarth, (2001 p.48) describes as the "the unique and unrepeatable poetry of an individual life".

This thesis concludes with a note of optimism. In 2015, higher education scholar Ben Wildavsky made this prediction about MOOCs:

> The combination of expanding educational aspirations, greatly improved technology, and more creative pedagogy will inevitably lead to more global experimentation with MOOCs, naysayers notwithstanding. MOOCs will surely need to evolve to serve students more effectively. But, the standard for new forms of higher education should not be whether they are perfect. It should be how they compare to the highly imperfect alternatives faced by many students, particularly in the world's poorest countries (Wildavsky, 2015, p.24).

This global experimentation to transform access to education continues apace, with innovative teaching and learning methods, MOOCs and OERs among them, gradually incorporating more diverse epistemic perspectives. In May 2022, the Government of Timor-Leste signed an agreement to establish a Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable (TLSSC) linking Timor-Leste to a global network of subsea fibre-optic cables, with the then Timorese Prime Minister quoted as saying that access to this network "would accelerate training and education, especially in updating knowledge to our young Timorese" (Martins, 2022, n.p). Recognising the barriers which remain to open online education, while exploring how people in Timor-Leste currently take up ICTs and use them to learn, can help develop better learning resources, contributing to a more globally equitable knowledge system.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participant Interview log

Participant	Occupation	Place of origin	Scholarship status (if applicable)
1.	Higher education manager	Dili	Alumnus
2.	Scholarship student	Dili	Scholar/alumnus
3.	Embassy staff	Viqueque	Applicant/scholar/alumnus
4.	Higher education stakeholder	USA	Not applicable (NA)
5.	Higher education stakeholder	Australia	NA
6.	Student	Dili	Applicant
7.	Public servant	Lautem	Alumnus
8.	Public servant	Lautem	Alumnus
9.	Student	Ermera	Applicant
10.	International student	Australia	NA
11.	Public servant	Dili	Alumnus
12.	University lecturer	Lautem	Applicant
13.	INGO staff	Australia	NA
14.	Engineer	Dili	Alumnus
15.	Student	Manatuto	Applicant
16.	Student	Manufahi	Applicant
17.	Student	Lautem	Applicant
18.	Student	Baucau	Applicant

19.	Student	Unknown	Applicant
20.	Student	Unknown	Applicant
21.	Student	Dili	Applicant
22.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
23.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
24.	Student	Cova Lima	Applicant
25.	Student	Bobonaro	Applicant
26.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
27.	Student	Lautem	Applicant
28.	Student	Viqueque	Applicant
29.	University foreign adviser	United Kingdom (UK)	NA
30.	University lecturer	Viqueque	Alumnus
31.	University technical support	Dili	Applicant
32.	University technical support	Dili	Applicant
33.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
34.	Student	Ainaro	Applicant
35.	Student	Lautem	Applicant
36.	Student	Oecussi	Applicant
37.	LELI teacher	Baucau	Alumnus/applicant/scholar
38.	Scholarship recruiter	Australia	NA
39.	Scholarship student	Dili	Scholar/alumnus
40.	LELI staff	Baucau	NA
41.	Public Servant	Lautem	Scholar/Alumnus
42.	Scholarship student	Atauro	Scholar/alumnus

43.	Public Servant	Viqueque	NA
44.	Scholarship Alumnus	Viqueque	Alumnus
45.	Public servant	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Alumnus
46.	Scholarship student	Dili	Scholar
47.	Student	Manatuto	Applicant
48.	Embassy staff	Dili	Alumnus
49.	LELI staff	UK	NA
50.	LELI Teacher	Ireland	NA
51.	Scholarship student	Dili	Scholar
52.	Scholarship student	Dili	Scholar
53.	INGO staff	Australia	NA
54.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
55.	Doctor	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Alumnus
56.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
57.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
58.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
59.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant

60.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
61.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
62.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
63.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
64.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
65.	Student	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
66.	Student	Dili	Applicant
67.	LNGO staff	Lautem	NA
68.	LNGO staff	Baucau	Applicant
69.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
70.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
71.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
72.	Student	Dili	Applicant
73.	University Lecturer	Dili	Alumnus

74.	LELI Teacher	UK	NA
75.	Student	Baucau	Applicant/Scholar
76.	LNGO staff	Cuba	NA
77.	Student	Dili	Applicant
78.	Student	Aileu	Applicant
79.	Student	Manatuto	Applicant
80.	Public servant	Dili	Applicant
81.	Teacher	UK	NA
82.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
83.	INGO staff	Dili	Alumnus
84.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
85.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
86.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
87.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
88.	LNGO staff	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Applicant
89.	Embassy staff	Dili	Alumnus
90.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
91.	Student	Liquiça	Applicant
92.	Student	Ermera	Applicant

93.	Student	Dili	Applicant
94.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
95.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
96.	LELI teacher	Baucau	Applicant
97.	Public servant	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Alumnus
98.	Public servant	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Alumnus
99.	Public servant	Unknown (Timor-Leste)	Alumnus
100.	Public servant	Dili	Alumnus
101.	INGO staff	Baucau	Scholar/alumnus
102.	Public servant	Dili	Alumnus/applicant
103.	Internet hub manager	Dili	Applicant/scholar/alumnus
104.	LELI teacher	Lautem	Applicant
105.	LELI teacher	Bobonaro	Applicant
106.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
107.	Public servant	Dili	Applicant
108.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
109.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
110.	LNGO staff	Dili	Applicant
111.	LNGO staff	Ermera	Applicant
112.	LELI Teacher	Baucau	Applicant
113.	LELI Teacher	Aileu	Applicant

114.	Embassy staff	Bobonaro	Alumnus/scholar
115.	LNGO staff	Lautem	NA
116.	NGO staff	Dili	Applicant
117.	NGO staff	Baucau	NA
118.	NGO staff	Dili	Applicant
119.	Student	Manatuto	Applicant
120.	Student	Unknown	Applicant
121.	LELI teacher	Liquiça	Alumnus
122.	Student	Baucau	Applicant
123.	INGO staff	Ermera	Applicant
124.	Internet hub manager	Liquiça	Alumnus
125.	LELI Teacher	Baucau	Applicant
126.	Scholarship student	Dili	Scholar
127.	Scholarship student	Lautem	Scholar

APPENDIX 2. COVER PAGES OF PUBLISHED PAPERS COMPRISING CHAPTERS 5-9.

International **R**eview of **R**esearch in **O**pen and **D**istributed **L**earning
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MOOCs and OER in the Global South: Problems and Potential

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Abstract

This paper examines the problems and potential of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Education Resources (OER) in the global South. Employing a systematic review of the research into the use of open online learning technologies in Southern contexts, we identify five interrelated themes emerging from the literature: 1) access to the Internet; 2) participant literacies; 3) online pedagogies; 4) the context of content; and 5) the flow of knowledge between North and South. The significance of Southern voice and participation is addressed in the final section, which concludes that on balance, the literature offers a qualified endorsement of the potential and actualities of MOOCs and OER in the global South. The ongoing tendency for the research literature to pay little heed to the agency of the social actors with the most to gain from these innovations is noted, opening up space for further research into the lived experience of online learners in the global South.

Keywords: online learning, MOOCs, OER, global South, international education

Doing MOOCs in Dili: Studying online learner behaviour in the Global South

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Abstract

This work in progress paper is part of an ethnographic action research project investigating the potential for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to provide learning opportunities to students in Dili, Timor-Leste. A systematic review of academic literature on MOOCs and Open Educational Resources (OER) in the Global South[1] identified key emergent themes: The infrastructural barriers to Internet access; the literacies required to participate in online learning; the new, often unfamiliar pedagogical approaches; and the context of content. This paper examines these themes in Dili as they play out in practice. A fifth theme in the literature is also discussed; the imbalance of knowledge flow from global North to South, leading to accusations of academic neocolonialism. This paper proposes that qualitative learner behaviour research is crucial to understanding how online learners in places like Dili negotiate the conditions which constrain and enable learning in MOOCs, and concludes that MOOC platforms need to acknowledge postcolonial critiques and give greater voice to academics in the Global South.

Keywords. MOOCs for development, Ethnography, User behaviour studies,

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Experiences of Timorese language teachers in a blended Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

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Abstract

This paper details the experiences of a group of Timorese English language teachers from Lorosa'e English Language Institute (LELI) in Dili, Timor-Leste, who participated in a professional development MOOC entitled *Teaching for Success: Lessons and Teaching* between March and April 2017. Drawing on the pedagogical principles of blended learning; participants engaged with online course content, and once a week met as a study group to view some video content together and discuss issues arising from it. The authors draw on participant observation, individual and focus group interviews and post-course author reflections to outline the benefits and challenges of doing blended MOOCs in Dili, and propose that they can provide local English language teachers opportunities for subject area knowledge building, language literacy development and more general lifelong learning.

Key Words: Online learning; MOOC; global South; developing countries; Continuing Professional Development; teacher training; Timor-Leste

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Southern agency and digital education: an ethnography of open online learning in Dili, Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT
This ethnography, based on fieldwork in Dili, Timor-Leste between 2015 and 2017, adopts an orthodox sociological theorising of agency to investigate the ways in which people in Dili negotiate the numerous interacting structural barriers to digital education. Having identified a lack of attention to learner agency in the literature on the promotion and adoption of MOOCs and OER in the Global South (King, Pegrum, and Forsey [2018]. 'MOOCs and OER in the Global South: Problems and Potential'. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 19 (5): 2–20. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v19i5.3742), the paper addresses Connell's [(2008). *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin] influential criticism of the imbalances in global knowledge production, and explores the parallels in technologically enhanced learning. A new concept- Southern agency- is developed through the stories of three Timorese students and their engagement with digital education, focussing on the influences of local infrastructure, family, literacies and the colonial legacy. The paper highlights the need for more extensive research into local practices of learning with technologies and advocates Southern agency as a heuristic device to gain valuable insights into the lived experience of Southern learners.

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KEYWORDS
Digital education; Global South; Southern theory; MOOCs; OER

Prologue: testing the infrastructure

It's a warm, dry afternoon in Parque 5 Maio in Dili, Timor-Leste in July 2015. Six covered picnic tables and benches follow the circular design of the garden, surrounding a 'hulk' statue of a muscle-bound Indonesian warrior in national dress breaking the chains of oppression, an ironic relic of the military occupation of the country from 1975 to 1999. At each bench groups of students gather in the shade around laptops purchased, usually using pooled family savings, from local elec-

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International Scholarships and Southern Agency: An Ethnography of Alumni, Scholars, and Applicants

Monty King[1], Martin Forsey[1], and Mark Pegrum[2]

Abstract

International scholarships are an established mode of aid distribution for many donor countries and a life-changing educational opportunity for recipients from the global South. This article draws upon ethnographic field research centred on Dili, Timor-Leste, focussing on case studies of a scholarship applicant, a scholar, and an alumnus. It employs the concept of *Southern agency,* investigating individual practices shaped by influences that both constrain and enable action, namely local infrastructure, family and kinship groups, literacies, and the colonial legacy. Scholarship places are limited and extremely competitive, while assigning a moral imperative for alumni to learn and return to contribute to local development, often resulting in the re-production of socially normed roles echoing the colonial era. The global upheaval in higher education resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the need for alternative interventions in the global South, including greater investment in local higher education institutions, and online learning.

Keywords

International scholarships, Ethnography of education, Timor-Leste, global South, online education

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