

Appointments and Personal Connections in the Universities of the British Empire, 1850-1940

Tamson Pietsch (History), University of Oxford (UK)

This paper will examine the mechanisms by which staff were appointed to academic positions in universities located in different parts of the British Empire between 1850 and 1940. It argues that for most of this period, universities in the settlement colonies used appointment practices that relied heavily on informal and transnational personal connections. Whether through search or selection committees, these connections determined everything from the advertising of the post, to the weighing of testimonials and the decision to interview. Possession of the right connections, therefore, conferred significant advantage to certain candidates while at the same time excluding others. Appointments made in this way then served to re-enforce these connections, which were additionally bolstered by both the procession of colonial graduates to further study in Britain and the appointment of staff with colonial experience to Chairs there. In these ways, British disciplinary networks were extended abroad, creating densely woven social spaces which functioned as sites, not just for the traffic of objects, information and people, but also for the production of ideas. For, morphing the geography of empire, this social space helped embed 'colonial' expertise deep within 'metropolitan' knowledge systems. Cultural capital thus worked to foster a particular kind of mobility that in turn led not merely to the transfer of knowledge, but also to its creation.