Special issue 'Reconceptualizing the International subject: Unsettling Equality and Interculturality in Higher Education'

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International journal

Editorial: ***'Bordering, othering, and reconceptualising the Inter/national subject in Higher Education'***

This special issue is concerned with a timely and seemingly neutralised issue; internationalization of higher education institutions and the making and unmaking of the 'international' subject in the UK and across different social-cultural, national and political contexts. Our international/transnational/migrant standpoint and research track record in critical perspectives to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Intercultural Communication respectively, sparked interest in this topic and is discussed in detail later in this editorial. In what follows we briefly discuss the introduction and current challenges of internationalization in the UK, its implementation in other Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts, in an attempt to unravel the highly politicized assertions underpinning dominant discourses of internationalization and conceptualizations of 'international' in different geo-political contexts. We contend that processes and practices of internationalization and discourses of 'international' are in fact inherently antithetical rather than synergistic with social justice goals and largely endemic and epidemic to the neo-liberalised ethos, colonial structures and white patriarchal, capitalist regimes of higher education institutions. Critical internationalization research that problematizes the popular framing of internationalization in terms of economic, intellectual and multi/intercultural benefits and the formation of international academic staff and students as disembodied subjects- reduced to indicators of cosmopolitanism, enhanced human capital and global competitiveness- has potential to advance theorizations of difference and equality, and to inform, enrich, and transform social justice agendas in higher education institutions.

In the last few years, discourses of the international student in the UK have oscillated from moral panic, xenophobia and disgust about large numbers of non-UK students in higher education to tolerable menace and/or financial saviours of universities, depending on government migration and education agendas and the changing landscape of higher education (The Financial Times, 2023). Currently, anti-immigration, nationalist and populist discourses on one hand, and allegedly neutral discourses of quality, academic freedom and ethics on the other, put internationalization perspectives, policies and practices under scrutiny and threat (Altbach and De Wits, 2018).

Several vice-chancellors in the UK have recently expressed optimism after the change of tone in Labour government's migration discourse and in Education Secretary's welcoming message to international students (The Guardian, 2024). Despite enduring trepidation about the future of higher education in the UK, strategic recruitment and healthy intake of international students continue to be seen as the main solutions for success and sustainability of higher education. Notions of higher education as public good are not only largely absent from internationalization discourses but also considered anachronistic and out of place in many Western and Westernised contexts. Quality and excellence are constructed as impossible without being associated with international recruitment and competition. However, many researchers contest this normative association, arguing that competition and in particular rankings have led universities away from their public good missions (Lynch 2015; Marginson, 2016).

In the UK, Thatcher's reforms in the early 1980s including the introduction of fees for non-UK students and the Research Assessment exercise (RAE) transformed higher education institutions to competitive businesses. It has been argued that such changes paved the way for the growth and

development of UK Universities into world-leading institutions (The Times Higher Education Supplement, 2013). However, it has also been argued that these policies have exacerbated hierarchies and inequalities among universities, staff and students, impacted negatively on academic work, freedom and academic identities (Tsouroufli, 2024; UUKI, 2024). The impact of the marketisation of higher education and the commitment to market fundamentalism (Gray et al, 2018; McKenna, 2024) is most visible in practices of governmentality within individual institutions that highlight auditing, accounting and management as core principles for their functioning (Olssen and Peters, 2005). For example, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) have become tools of neoliberal accountability (O'Regan and Gray, 2018) and quantification of knowledge that undermine the traditional role of universities inherited from Renaissance Humanism (Mack, 2023) as places dedicated to the cultivation and creation of knowledge.

In 2020-21, the UK welcomed 605,130 international students, reaching the 600,000 target (UK government International Education Strategy 2019/2021) almost a decade earlier than the 2030 deadline (HESA, 2022). International students accounted for 22.0% of the total student population in 2020-21. 15.7% of all undergraduates and 39.1% of all postgraduates were international students (HESA, 2022). The UK dropped to the third most popular study destination for international students in 2019 as Australia overtook the UK for the first time (UUKI, 2024; International facts and Figures 2022). It is beyond the scope of this editorial to provide a comprehensive review of internationalization policies and statistics in different continents and countries but in what follows we will attempt to highlight the entanglements of coloniality, racism, and cultural and linguistic imperialism underpinning popular internationalization discourses, practices and notions of the 'international' student and academic, by engaging with internationalization research in different national contexts.

Australia is prolific in terms of internationalization theory of higher education and empirical research and since the mid- 1980s impressive in growth of numbers of international students, mainly from Asia. Research has focused extensively on the 'deficiencies' of international students, their language difficulties, challenges in adapting to the host culture and integration approaches. Recently attention has been given to internationalizing the curriculum promoted almost exclusively as a way to achieve international awareness, competence and expertise, skills essential in developing global citizenship (Sawir, 2013). The silencing of discourses of higher education curriculum as space for othering for minoritised and international students or possibilities for global justice and a fairer world reflect the wider trend in higher education institutions to depoliticize learning, professionalize knowledge and generate the neo-liberal global citizen responsible for self-improvement and irresponsible for social action and justice.

Cultural exchange, international collaboration and notions of culture are pivotal to romanticizing internationalization and trivializing difference. Far from benign and unproblematic, notions of culture are inextricably connected with relations of domination and subordination within education and beyond and carry risks of reproducing power structures in the process of internationalization (Lumby and Foskett, 2016). The linguistic and intercultural dimensions of this depoliticised internationalisation are made evident in the hegemonic role played by English as the lingua franca of academia and the concomitant success of intercultural competence toolkits that promise to prepare students to become 'global citizens'. From this perspective, the instrumental link between economic productivity, employability and the learning of English (Kubota, 2011) is tied with notions of intercultural communicative competence that emphasise individualism and instrumental rationality (Ferri, 2018).

Not only signs of internationalization in higher education, such as large number of foreign students and staff and international agreements, do not signify cultural change (Gibbs, 2010), but internationalization can operate as a form of cultural and linguistic imperialism (Philipson, 2017) through processes of cultural homogenization of students and boundary practices of inclusion/exclusion of an institutional, national, host or epistemic culture that is in fact associated with greater value (e.g. British, Anglophone or European) and allegedly global values (Lumby and Foskett, 2016; Tsouroufli, 2015). In this sense, the variety of English that is considered most valuable in the neoliberal knowledge market is still that of the inner circle of Anglophone countries identified by Kachru (1985) that most adheres to native speaker ideals (Bunce et al, 2016; Ferri, Magne, 2020). Stein and Andreotti (2017) draw on Castoriadis' concept of social imaginery (1987) to contend that a modern global imaginery of higher education is in fact, a colonial, racist and heteropatriarchal gender matrix of power with material relations and symbolic social meanings that position European reason and Western cultures as the centre, and internationalizing foreign students is conditional for overcoming their deficit and developing educational and human capital and paradoxically enriching for local students and the knowledge economy.

Despite several projects in the UK and other parts of the world in the last ten years such as *'Why is my curriculum white?'* by University College London (UCL) students; *'Liberate My Degree',* by the National Union of Students (NUS), and Rhodes must fall RMF in South Africa, and public statements by universities supporting commitment to decolonizing higher education, Shein et al.'s (2021) research demonstrated that institutional responses to decolonization in England include silence, reluctant acceptance and strategic advancement, indicating that universities are a long way from genuinely and effectively disrupting the epistemic, political and pedagogical projects of imperial conquests in the Americas, Asia and Africa (Lugones,2010; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012; Stein and Andreotti, 2016) and within Europe (Tsouroufli, 2023). It would seem that decolonizing, like other Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives (Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter) in neo-liberal higher education institutions are only accepted if they are perceived to be moderate and not challenging the gender and race order (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Tsouroufli, 2018; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

In predominantly Euro-American theorizations of internationalization of higher education, colonial legacies and persistent racial inequalities seem to be overshadowed by the imperatives of global competition and citizenship underpinning popular internationalization discourses of higher education. Despite strong critique of the very rationale of internationalization from within postcolonial contexts (Maringe, Foskett, and Woodfield 2013; Maringe 2017), rather than ethically and critically navigating the history of colonial relations and global power asymmetries in all aspects of organisational life, British higher education has institutionalised EDI initiatives, in an attempt to evade the conflicting relationship of social justice with internationalization, globalization and neoliberalism. Such tensions are also present in the developing world, where internationalization initiatives might seem more peripheral internationally. South Africa and Brazil for example, countries with colonial legacies and strong social justice and internationalization commitments, attract high numbers of regional students. Blackness as the strong presence of Black international students on campus has been instrumentalised to signify racial justice's compatibility with the internationalization imperatives of South Africa and Brazil and to overcome tensions between these two narratives (Majee and Ress, 2020). However, Changamire et al.'s (2022) analysis of policies and narratives of international graduates in South Africa, has shown how internationalization processes operate along an empty diversity rhetoric and reproduce various forms of racism, perpetuating white supremacy and Western hegemony and relegating Blackness to the margins. In another popular, non-Western destination for international students from Asia, South-Korea, mixed-method

research by Lee et al. (2017) uncovered forms of racism and nationalism in the form of anti-Chinese sentiments resulting in verbal aggressions and challenges securing housing.

In the UK, Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) 2019 report into racism in Higher Education has provided compelling qualitative and quantitative evidence about the strong prevalence and nature of racial discrimination and xenophobia, which universities seemed largely unaware of and surprisingly confident to tackle. However, the report discusses racism in higher education as an isolated phenomenon, rather than as an integral part of the discourse, logic and practices of internationalized HE, which is underpinned by the discourses of excellence and investment (Beighton, 2020).

Buckner et al. (2021) in their interrogation of internationalization strategy documents of higher education institutions in the UK, USA and Canada found that although cultural diversity was celebrated in their official strategies, their discussions were silent about international students' racial identities and experiences of racism and appeared to be normalizing whiteness against which difference was defined. Informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies, (CWT),this research is rare in critically interrogating the role of documents in shaping beliefs about institutions and creating popular institutional narratives about internationalization and diversity (Ahmed, 2007). These findings require further attention given that one-third of all international students (around five million) studied in foreign countries in 2017 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018), enrolled in only three countries: the U.S., the U.K., and Canada (IIE, 2019), which bare strong similarities in their conceptualizations of international students as a source of income generation and diversity.

Most of the research regarding both theory and implementation of internationalisation, is conducted in the West and the most commonly accepted understandings derive from the research traditions of the Anglophone world. Researchers in Central and Eastern European countries use the term 'internationalisation', to either refer to a policy change encouraged by a supranational institution or global education discourse, or an education process through which an international or intercultural dimension is integrated into higher education (Orechova, 2021). Poland, Lithuania, and Estonia are the only countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that have adopted official strategies for internationalization in higher education (Crăciun 2018, 100). These strategies provide incentives for public universities and impact their specific development strategies. Understood as an intentional process of integrating an international and/or intercultural dimension into the goals, functions, and delivery of higher education, internationalization aims to improve the quality of national education and research and their global presence (De Wit and Altbach, 2021). Pietrzyk-Reeves' (2022) research in Political Sciences Departments in Poland has demonstrated that internationalization can promote research synergies, enhance the teaching of research and raise the research profile of institutions. Although there are documented benefits particularly for Social Sciences, which have been slowing developing in Central and Eastern European (CEE) academia (Heredy et al, 2022), international collaborations are located within European and global colonial structures and hierarchical epistemic cultures, thus creating possibilities for building research capital as well as well as spaces for othering, misrecognition and marginalization (Tsouroufli 2015; 2023; 2025). Moreover values of international collaboration and research are instrumental and have been seen to be repositioned in times of crisis to meet pragmatic rather than political ends (Courtois and Veiga, 2020).

Beyond Europe, countries like Japan with a large higher education system and a large private higher education sector now requires selected universities to recruit more international students, develop new English-medium instruction (EMI) degree programmes (Bradford and Brown 2017), and increase

the proportions of international faculty, in an attempt to become a successful competitor in the global knowledge economy. One of the distinguishing features of internationalisation in Japan is the privileging of English, and particularly the native speaker variety, resulting in cultural stereotyping and uneven employment prospects in HE (Inoue and Anderson, 2022). Although promoted as empowering and transformational, internationalization can reproduce local, organisational and global inequalities and create new form of exclusion and racism (Tsouroufli, 2023; 2025). Morley et al 's (2021) qualitative research with migrant academics in Japan over two years (2017-2018) has illuminated the opportunities as well as affective challenges, entrapments and identity challenges of migrant academics in navigating the national culture and language and the gendered and neoliberal regimes of Japanese higher education. Other critics of Japan's higher education internationalisation processes argue that they encapsulate the country's ambition to pump up a strong collective Japanese identity by rising as a star in the global knowledge economy (Hashimoto, 2000). This ambition, we argue, could also be interpreted as a form of resistance against Anglicization and internationalization of Japanese higher education, creating a complex dynamic between internationalisation and preserving their national cultural identity (Le Ha, 2013). Applied research approaches to the affective and political economy of internationalization in the global context are not sufficient, rendering an evidence-based deconstruction of the global knowledge economy- as gender/ race neutral, national citizen-less and overall innocuous- difficult. Tsouroufli's (2023; 2025) reflexive work highlights the materiality and affect of migrant bodies by exposing gendered racisms, racialized labours of academic migration and the enactment of privileged irresponsibility in British higher education, alongside superficial engagements with non-performative and disembodied grand narratives of equality and global citizenship. Magne and Ferri (2023) highlight the two-tier system in British HE with Russell Group and post-92 universities recreating societal inequalities along the lines of class, gender and race that are reproduced in the perceptions surrounding the use of non-standard English. Drawing on reflexive work with a graduate student, Nicotra and Patel (2016) contest the political economy of internationalised higher education for developing global citizenship and instead call for a shift to good citizenship as a moral imperative. Internationalisation and decoloniality in this sense can share similar aims (Wimpenny et al, 2021) but only if internationalisation is disentangled from neoliberal strategies. What transpires from this review of literature on internationalisation is that in the complex world system dominated by global capitalism, the imperative to marketise education relegates issues of social justice to empty rhetorical gestures that do not address the systemic and structural inequalities both within individual states and transnationally. The papers in this issue address this conundrum facing internationalisation from the perspectives of migrant, transnational academics.

Standpoint on migrant transnational academics

This special issue is edited from the standpoint of transnational, international and foreign, Southern European female academics. These three categories/identities are characterised by an intersectional impact of disadvantage and privilege (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012), belonging and othering processes and experiences (Tsouroufli, 2012, 2015) and configurations of gender, race/ethnicity and care shaped by socio-political and spatio-temporal particularities, movements and the interdependency of various locations and transnational lives (Tsouroufli, 2025).

(First Author) My trajectory as a transnational/international/foreign woman since I came to the UK in 1996 has been marked by various types of violence and my mobility has been enmeshed with possibilities and challenges. White in skin colour but not white enough; multi-lingual but not native speaker of English, and of a cultural heritage and nationality seen as second-class European (Tsouroufli, 2023), I have always been seen to suffer from a baggage of deficit rather than having

multiple skills and opportunities that have allowed me to build international connections and research capital. Like many other Europeans, racialized as white upon arrival to the UK led to misrecognitions and alienations (Andrikopoulos, 2023), often trivialised or invisibilised in a context where colonialism and imperialism are usually understood only in relation to British domination, and white privilege is often decontextualized and treated as innate to anyone with white skin (Tsouroufli, 2025).

Occupying multiple epistemic worlds and socio-political worlds as transnational academic has not always meant unlimited or unrestricted movement between physical spaces but rather occupying interconnected locations-worlds which alongside race/ethnicity and gender shifted over time as a result of local, national and global changes and crises. For example, Brexit exacerbated my foreignness although I had already obtained British citizenship at the time, and the lockdowns during the COVID19 epidemic restricted international travelling and thus my ability to perform gendered care and my role as a 'good' daughter (Tsouroufli, 2025).

Last but not least, having been raised and educated abroad, in a socio-cultural and political context where education was seen as a public good and a space to develop ethical and critical citizenship for social justice, I had no experience of neo-liberalised, privatised and internationalised universities. The multiple marginalities I suffered and my agonising and agonistic projects of survival and career progression in UK HE have strengthened my stance a feminist, critical, decolonial scholar and inspired my writing including this special issue.

(Second author) I have a similar trajectory to the first author. Since coming to the UK in 1998 I experienced the intersectional pattern of advantage and disadvantage afforded to me in virtue of my status as an economic migrant with the cultural capital of a degree from a European country. My academic trajectory is not straightforward but marked by a series of setbacks and false starts that led to initially choosing a different profession that offered more economic stability.

As an academic, I experience the double bind of working in HE while also occupying several identity positions as a non-native speaker, Southern European woman, first arrived in the UK as an economic migrant (Ferri, 2020). As author one, this positionality has influenced my thinking and research interest towards feminist, critical and decolonial intercultural studies and applied linguistics.

Introducing the papers

Although we initially did not request from contributors to this issue to explicitly address their international academic standpoint, it is important to highlight that all authors are or have been migrant/transnational/international/foreign academics. However, we later invited them to participate in a discussion forum/a reflexive dialogue to share ideas and experiences about their international/migrant academic standpoint among other issues. We also invited Senior Professor Phan Le Ha from the Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education (SHBIE) at Universiti Brunei and Honorary Professor at IOE UCL, as expert in the field of international and comparative education to write a creative and alternative concluding piece for our special issue.

The focus of the research critically discussed by authors covers interdisciplinary and different geographical locations, including Canada, Central and East Europe, Brazil and the UK. The first two papers:

'Doubly Precarious Immigrant Academics in Canada: Work Integration of a Highly-skilled Precariat in Canadian Higher Education' by Amrita Hari, Luciara Nardon and Dunja Palic, and 'International Subjects on the Periphery: The Publishing Challenges of Early-Career Female Academics from Central

and Eastern Europe' by Karolina Lendák-Kabók, Stéphanie Mignot-Gerard and Marc Vanholsbeeck focus on the experiences of immigrant academics in Canada and Europe.

In this first paper, Hari, Nardon and Palic make and important contribution by turning attention to the embodied and affective dimensions of immigrant academic precarity in Canada. Drawing on data from a qualitative interview study and through a phenomenological analysis of immigrants' lived experiences the multiple exclusions and misrecognitions of migrants, as well as the career and health and well-being implications come to the fore. The negotiation and shifting of academic identities resulting from precarity within the diverse but nevertheless historically and socio-culturally White-Anglocentric and colonial Canadian higher education highlight the complexity of highly skilled immigration and its commodification, exploitation and denigration for the survival of neo-liberal, internationalised academic institutions and the solidification of privilege of White Westernised credentials and knowledges.

Lendák-Kabók, Mignot-Gerard and Vanholsbeeck make an equally important contribution by critically investigating the power asymmetries in the European academic and geo-political context, their exacerbation by aggressive neo-liberalization of Central and Eastern European academic institutions and internationalization of research and knowledge production. Through semi-structured interviews with 32 female and male early career academics the celebration and resistance of the entrepreneurial subject and 'Westernised' notions of academic success is outlined. Although pervasive, corroding and largely embraced, the neo-liberal logic and academic performativity appears inherently disadvantageous for many Central and Eastern Europeans who are presented with the limited resources at the aftermath of post-communism and the endured realities of linguistic racism and epistemic violences of internationalised European research community.

Ramzi Merabet's paper 'Students we Label International: An urgent call to reconceptualise research with international students' draws on his doctoral research with students in a university in England, UK. He employed a narrative research approach and qualitative analysis informed by critical realism to juxtapose the endured realities of othering of international students with the grand narratives of equality and equity in British higher education policy. Ramzi demonstrates how essentialist notions of cultural, national and linguistic difference are mobilised to homogenise and pathologise and thus justify the exploitation and dehumanization of international students. Students' narratives clearly demonstrate intentionality and agency in their neo-liberal projects of building international capital but also strong awareness of the operation of antithetical discourses and practices in British higher education policy and practice. The paradoxical relation of UK international universities with international students requires further attention and a critical approach to the making and unmaking of the 'international' subject and the non-performative discourses of equality and equity that underpin and sustain simplistic and reductionist notions of difference and seductive fantasies of social justice.

In ' 'Towards diverse, critical understandings of 'international' for higher education'', Zhuomin Huang, Heather Cockayne, Jenna Mittelmeier conducted a curriculum review of an international education masters programme offered at a University in England in an attempt to investigate understandings and enactments of international and internationalization among academic staff. Analysis of formal and informal curriculum through texts, documents and staff survey has illuminated normative notions of international and internationalization underpinned by essentialist and uncritical conceptualizations and practices of interculturality and globalization. Although some critical interpretations of international emerged, drawing attention to decoloniality and intercultural education that challenges injustices, internationalisation was articulated as largely depoliticized and professionalized.

‘A critical reflection on EDI certification in Brazilian academia’ is co-authored by Charikleia Tzanakou from Oxford Brookes University and Brazilian academics Camilla Infanger, Leticia Oliveira, Fernanda Staniscuaski. This contribution draws attention to a very under-researched and timely issue; the popular and unproblematic transportation and implementation of EDI initiatives and certification from Western/Anglophone contexts to Global South contexts. The authors draw on work funded under the British Council’s programme “Women in Science: Gender Equality Partnerships Call” which aimed at facilitating partnerships between UK higher education institutions (HEIs) certified by the Athena Swan Charter and Brazilian institutions. They share their collaborative and non-hierarchical approach which led to a gender equality framework sensitive to the Brazilian legacies of racial plurality and injustice, the power asymmetries between Global South and North and the social-political and financial challenges of Brazilian higher education institutions.

Conclusion, future perspectives

The articles in this special issue make important contributions to critical perspectives to internationalisation in the context of EDI concerns relating to gender, race, academic mobility, and wider geographical inequalities not only between the Global South and Global North, but also within the Global North itself. The paucity of research examining these concerns in the field of EDI reveal the scarce interest in providing a critical reading of internationalisation that confronts the often tokenistic nature of equality, diversity and inclusion in the context of highly marketized, neoliberal universities. Despite repeated attempts at securing a wider geographical representation that would include Asia, Africa and Oceania, the editors were not able to include research from these areas. However, the papers in this special issue provide an interdisciplinary range of perspectives ranging from gender studies, migration studies and intercultural communication within a number of academic practices that include curriculum design, EDI policies, science and gender, and publishing practices that affect minoritised academics.

As editors, we hope that this special issue advances and expands future research in internationalisation and EDI that critically examines the intersectional experiences of transnational and migrant academics, the marketisation of neoliberal academia and its effects on EDI policies and social justice more broadly, including decolonial practices in knowledge production.

In order to explore some of future perspectives in this area the special issue is followed by a piece in the form of an open conversation between the authors and the editors. We created an open forum and invited contributors to share insights on two key questions, the first relating to their experiences of internationalisation and the second dedicated to the most pressing issues in the field. Through these inquiries, we aimed to provide a platform for contributors to further elaborate on their own voices and experiences in the field. Our two questions have been answered by three of the contributors to this special issue Dr Karolina Lendak-Kabok, Faculty of Social Sciences, Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest, Dr Ramzi Merabet, Lecturer in EAP and Intercultural Studies, University of Leeds, UK and Dr Charikleia Tzanakou, Reader in Human Resources at Oxford Brookes University in the UK.

In the final and concluding piece in this special issue, Senior Professor Phan Le Ha and prolific writer in the field of internationalization in Asia-Pacific, Gulf region and English-speaking Western countries, engages in formal academic writing norms combined with creative genres, including poetry and storytelling, and with somewhat casual free-style writing to go beyond identifying overarching themes in our special issue. Her article is concerned with the question of diversity in international higher education (IHE) and the persistence of dominant neo-liberal and colonial discourses of internationalization despite the critical scholarship in the field in the last 30 years.

Drawing on the prevalent discourse of over-enrolment of Chinese students in English-speaking countries, she exposes the reality of inequality in IHE and encourages us to confront and transform complicity to injustices perpetuated through the operation of internationalization practices.

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