

Equitable Higher Education in Times of Disruption

Proceedings of the 2024 WES-CIHE Summer Institute

SASHA SMITH, EDITOR



BOSTON COLLEGE

Lynch School of Education and Human Development

CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION



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FOREWORD

We are delighted to present our annual Proceedings of the WES-CIHE Summer Institute, a joint initiative of World Education Services (WES) and the Center for International Higher Education (CIHE) at Boston College.

The theme of this year's Summer Institute was *Equitable Higher Education in Times of Disruption*. In an era of disruptions of many kinds - such as pandemics, climate change, and conflict, just to name a few - higher education is faced with challenges to navigate rapidly changing realities, overcome economic, political, ecological, and technological difficulties, and equitably serve its multiple stakeholders. By focusing on this theme, our aim was to foreground new empirical and conceptual work that seeks to advance higher education equity against this backdrop. What resulted was a dynamic event, profiling work from around the world that highlighted the experiences of a diverse range of stakeholders in higher education (from students to faculty to university presidents) faced with a broad range of "disruptions," at the local, national and international levels.

The WES-CIHE Summer Institute continues to play a crucial role in the field of international higher education, offering a welcoming and supportive space for graduate students and other early-career researchers to share their work and receive constructive feedback from experts. The next generation of researchers in our field are brave, insightful, and deeply concerned with issues of equity and justice. International higher education will be stronger as a result of their passions, voices, and perspectives.

There are many people to thank for their invaluable contributions to the success of the Summer Institute. CIHE would like to thank WES for its ongoing financial support of the event and for making this an-

nual publication possible. CIHE and WES would collectively like to thank the members of the 2024 Summer Institute planning committee (Ekaterina Minaeva, Marisa Lally, Maia Gelashvili, Asuka Ichikawa, and Sevgi Kaya-Kasikci) for their invaluable insights, hard work, and energy in both planning and running the Institute. We would also like to thank Sasha Smith for her editing support for this publication and Salina Kopellas, Staff Assistant at CIHE, for the layout and design.

We look forward to the next WES-CIHE Summer Institute in 2025.

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Internationalization of higher education through English Medium Instruction in East Asian countries: Rationales and issues

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Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI), as defined by Madhavan (2014), involves the teaching of a subject using the English language without explicit language learning aims in a country where the native language is not English. It is rapidly spreading in the higher education (HE) sectors of Asia Pacific countries, driven by factors such as the prominence of English in trade, commerce, diplomacy, and scholarship, the expansion of the HE sectors, and government policies aimed at internationalizing HE (Walkinshaw et al., 2017). Many Asian countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, consider EMI a core strategic goal across various academic disciplines (Galloway, 2020).

Initial reports on EMI primarily centered around the European context because EMI originated in Europe with the 1999 Bologna Declaration (Walkinshaw et al., 2017). While there is a growing body of literature on EMI in Asia, research on private higher education institutions (HEIs) is scarce.

Methods

This qualitative case study aims to fill this gap by exploring the drivers and challenges related to the adoption of EMI policies in six private universities across Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan. This research employs document analysis, fieldwork, and semi-structured interviews with 45 EMI program implementers across six private universities, including senior and ju-

nior administrative officials and faculty members. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data from the interviews, utilizing NVivo 12 analysis software. Each university is coded with letters: A & B in Mongolia, C & D in South Korea, and E & F in Japan.

Country contexts:

Mongolia

The government of Mongolia played a key role in the decision-making, planning, and development processes during the socialist regime between 1920 and 1990. However, with the transition to a market economy in the 1990s, the government reduced its funding for public HEIs, leading to the establishment of numerous private HEIs. The restructuring, mergers, and closures aimed at maintaining quality resulted in 64 HEIs operating as of 2023, a decrease from 95 HEIs in 2017 (Gundsambuu, 2019).

For nearly six decades until the 1990s, Russian was the primary foreign language taught in Mongolian schools. However, in the past two decades, despite English not being an official foreign language, its importance has been increasingly highlighted in various documents. Acknowledging the significance of EMI, the government, in 2008, provided financial support to educational institutions that adopted EMI (World Bank, 2008). The ambitious aim was to position at least four Mongolian public universities among the top in Asia; this initiative, however, did not achieve its goal.

South Korea

EMI is actively promoted in national initiatives like Incheon Global Campus (2014), CAMPUS Asia (2017), and academic programs such as international studies at local universities (Park, 2018). The objectives of EMI in these programs encompass innovating Korea's education system, fostering global leaders, and enhancing the international competitiveness of Korean universities. While there is no unified EMI policy for universities in government projects, EMI is regarded as a crucial indicator for measuring internationalization efforts.

In 2023, 202 universities and 133 community colleges were operating in South Korea, with the number of universities having gradually declined due to the government's policy of university restructuring in response to the declining university-age population (Yoon, 2024). To address this decline, the Ministry of Education has initiated the 'Study Korea 300k Plan' to attract international students, which includes expanding EMI degree programs (British Council, 2023). The motivation for universities to expand EMI programs is driven by the desire to improve rankings, both internationally and domestically (Kim, 2017).

Japan

Since the establishment of the first EMI undergraduate program—implemented at Sophia University in 1949—EMI continued to grow, gaining momentum in the 1970s with the institutionalization of exchange programs at private universities across Japan (Ota & Horiuchi, 2018). The Japanese government has initiated various projects to enhance global competitiveness and internationalize HE. This includes the 'Global Talent' project, focusing on preparing skilled professionals for the global workforce (Yonezawa, 2014). Additionally, Japan's current plan aims to attract 400,000 international students by 2033 (The Asahi Shimbun, 2024).

Factors driving the growth of EMI in Japan involve the recruitment of international students (Brown, 2017) and ambitions to improve global university rankings (Bolton et al., 2022). EMI also serves as a strategic response to a shrinking student pool (Bradford & Brown, 2018) as well as to mergers/closures of universities due to lower enrollment quotas (Inaba, 2020).

Findings

This study reveals that universities D, E, and F stressed the need for domestic recognition first and then for international recognition to attract more international students due to the lower enrollment quota. Universities C, E, and F introduced their EMI programs to align with their respective government policies. Universities C and E receive funding from their government to follow its policy to prioritize internationalization. Other universities A, B, D, and F have no financial support from their government.

The rationales for introducing the EMI programs at these universities are multifaceted and can be categorized as political (University E), social/cultural (E), branding related (B & F), economic (D), and academic (all). This study utilized a typology of EMI challenges: linguistic (e.g., English proficiency of domestic and international students, faculty members, and administrative officials), cultural (e.g., academic cultural norms), administrative and managerial (e.g., admission process; the internal working language), and institutional (e.g., insufficient financial resources). All institutions encountered these challenges during EMI program implementation. Linguistic challenges were a notable concern, with other challenges posing the most significant hurdles across all six institutions. Cultural challenges were comparatively less prevalent.

Conclusion

The case study universities aim to boost international competitiveness through EMI programs. In Japan and Korea, the case study universities focused on attracting international students due to the declining domestic enrollment. In Mongolia, private HEIs pursue EMI to tap into the global market without dedicated policy. Despite the shared goal of cultivating globally competitive graduates, challenges arise from inadequate funding, leading to administrative and institutional hurdles.

This study recommends that HEIs prioritize the quality of students, especially in international recruitment, and improve teaching and learning conditions for both international and domestic faculty members and students. Future studies should incorporate the perspectives of students alongside other stakeholders' views.

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Internationalization in Hungary: Stepping forward or backward?

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Introduction

For decades, internationalization of higher education was among priorities for Hungary. National policies, laws, and practices that were aligned with the European strategies and values created a multicultural educational environment and attracted international students. However, recent crises induced multiple changes in policies and legislation that threaten effective internationalization and produce inequalities and discrimination.

European context of internationalization in Hungary

A topic of the internationalization of higher education (IHE) is the ongoing discussion aimed at disclosing its goals and rationales, though both are changing with newly emerging concepts of IHE—such as comprehensive internationalization, critical internationalization, or internationalization for society (Brandenburg, 2020; Hudzik, 2012; Stein, 2019). It is generally agreed, however, that the principal objectives of IHE are targeted on teaching and learning, research, and social service as each aligns with the core missions of higher education. At the same time, discussions of IHE from a critical stance underline the negative effects of IHE, such as elitism and unequal access to international education (Stein, 2019). These effects significantly differ between institutions and countries given the heterogenous nature of IHE. Being grounded in national and regional policies and realities, IHE in the European Union (EU) strives to align with European social goals such as community engagement, equity and equality, cultural awareness, and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2019). National educational policies of member countries are mostly harmonized with the EU values stated by the Council of Europe since the Bologna Process, while na-

tional priorities and realities also play a pivotal role. Hungary, as a member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), adopted commitment to equity, collaboration, and inclusivity as core values of its educational system, but national policies and laws related to IHE are often inconsistent with these values.

This paper aims to better define the problem of IHE, as well as to propel further research on the effect of recent policy changes on IHE in Hungary. The proposed theoretical framework integrates theories of IHE along with equity and social justice theories to analyze the complex landscape of IHE in Hungary and uses feminist theories to address inequalities in international higher education.

National strategy

Signing the Bologna Declaration in 1999 was an important milestone for IHE in Hungary. Furthermore, launching the Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) Scholarship Program in 2013, which offered full-degree scholarships to students from developing countries, was a big step toward long-term comprehensive IHE on the national level. Planned as a strategic way to support international relations and convey worldwide a positive image of Hungary as a hub of quality higher education, the program attracted thousands of international degree-seeking enrollees (Stipendium Hungaricum, 2020). It shaped a multicultural international environment in national higher education and fostered internationalization at home as universities willing to receive a share of state-funded international students became more interested in launching English-taught programs, internationalizing their curricula, and forming engaging, tolerant, and culturally diverse academic communities on campuses. By offering HE opportunities to citizens of more than 90 developing countries, Hungary challenged economic inequality and promot-

ed equal access to high quality HE internationally. At the same time, a growing number of SH scholarship alumni promoted Hungarian universities and attracted self-funded international students, which aligned with the economic rationale of internationalization and produced economic benefits for the country. The scholarship also spurred the number of international PhD students, which was a valuable contribution to international research engagement and scientific collaborations (Kasza & Hangyál, 2018).

Students as IHE stakeholders

Keeping in mind all benefits of IHE for a country, the perspective of international students as key stakeholders can make a meaningful contribution to understanding the outcomes of IHE on a micro-level. According to Kasza and Hangyál (2018), among the main reasons behind the decision to apply for Hungarian universities are quality of education, available scholarships or affordable tuition fees, good country reputation, security and a low level of discrimination against foreigners, cultural attractiveness, and favorable immigration rules. These reasons are confirmed by international studies (Beyond the Data, 2015). At least 10% of students also consider career perspectives in Hungary as an important factor for making their choice, and among PhD graduates this share is even higher (Tempus Public Foundation, 2022).

Crises and policy changes

Assuming that a country is interested in the benefits of IHE and considers it among its priorities, knowing the expectations of students on the micro-level and the issues of the institutions on the meso-level provides an opportunity for the national government to implement meaningful strategic planning, setting and reaching the goals of IHE on the macro-level. Over the last decade, however, social institutions—including higher education institutions in Europe and worldwide—encountered multiple crises, surviving a pandemic, wars and conflicts, migration, growing inequalities, disruptions of democracy, nationalist movements, and others. Under the pressure of these challenges, countries modify social, political, and economic priorities. Hungary is no exception.

IHE is increasingly affected by turns toward national interests over EU priorities—turns such as reforms of labor and migration legislation from internationally friendly toward more conservative and defensive, which influence universities and international students from non-EU countries and often oppose such European values as inclusivity, equity, and equality (UNESCO, 2019). For instance, a new law on migration abolished family reunification for foreign students (Magyar Közlöny, 2023), which means that full-time students cannot live together with their partners and children during studies, contravening the directive of the Council of Europe (2005). This change can be crucial for postgraduate students and particularly for doctoral students whose average age is between 27 and 37 years (OECD, 2023). The position of women is even more vulnerable as the law cuts off access to education in Hungary for those who have children: the reunification with children for a period of studies has also been canceled. The duration of full-time MA and PhD programs is from two to four years, which is, for many, far too long for leaving families behind. The share of women among foreign students in Hungary is 53% for master's and 44% for doctoral students (OECD, 2023), which shows the number of current and potential female students implicitly affected by this regulation. The real extent of the legislation, of course, will only reveal itself with time. The current non-EU students who did not reunite with family members prior to the cancellation of reunification policies, or whose partners were employed but lost their jobs in Hungary, are also now unable to reunite, which could result in termination of their studies and a consequent increase in university dropout rates.

The labor market for PhD/MA graduates has become more limited as a result of recent changes, too, particularly for those wishing to proceed with research and teaching careers, as national or EEA country citizenship became one of the requirements for employment in public or government-associated institutions, including universities. Thus, the internationalization of university curricula and campuses can be less supported by hiring international academics and PhD graduates. Even before these changes, retention of talented international graduates and early-stage researchers was not prioritized by the national policies, and many of

the international PhD graduates did not seek professional integration in Hungary due to family reasons, which was cited as the second most frequent reason for leaving the country (Tempus Public Foundation, 2022). Predictably, the abolishment of family reunification and new employment regulations will strengthen this trend.

Conclusion

The picture of IHE in Hungary is more contradictory than ever. On one hand the country still promotes international education opportunities and the image of a non-discriminatory and safe place for international students—an image presented by Hungary for decades. Conversely, emerging initiatives, policies, and laws are becoming less accommodating for foreign students, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups such as women, children, and families, and generating inequalities. Therefore, comprehensive research on the issues of equality and justice across national IHE policies, as well as the challenges of international students—including women subjected to discrimination and inequalities—is urgently needed. The results of this study offer valuable insights and recommendations concerning the reconsideration of national and institutional IHE strategies that respect European values and the interests of all stakeholders, not only those of the decision makers.

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The Ecuadorian State's concept of and representations around higher education: Forty years of a roller coaster

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Introduction

This paper examines how the Ecuadorian State has shaped the national discourse on higher education from the restoration of democracy in 1979 to 2017. It argues that concepts and representations of universities are dynamic, evolving with historical, social, political, and economic contexts. The study investigates how these evolving meanings have influenced the State's approach to the roles and responsibilities of universities. Educational policies, official discourse, and regulations have changed significantly over the decades. Preliminary findings link economic, political, and social changes with university history and enrollment trends, identifying three key processes of transformation.

An era of surging demand

The 1970s in Ecuador were marked by a confluence of economic and political challenges, including high oil prices, fluctuating commodity prices, military rule, and fiscal instability. These issues significantly impacted the country's sociodemographic landscape, particularly in rural areas. Unskilled labor migrated from the countryside to cities, seeking better opportunities.

The return to democracy in the early 1980s ushered in a new era of educational aspirations. A new Constitution was drafted, and in 1982, the Law of Universities established the National Council of Universities and Polytechnic Schools, a self-governing body led by university presidents. Reflecting the perceived importance of universities in national development, the president at the time declared, "society will go where the university goes" (Pacheco, 2011). This quote highlights the university's envisioned role as a guiding light for Ecuador's democratic and modernization efforts.

This transitional period and return to democracy witnessed a remarkable surge in demand for higher education, particularly among the middle class. Total uni-

versity enrollment in Ecuador, increasing from 20,396 students in 1970 to 122,646 by the early 1980s (Higher Education Council, 2015), represented a staggering 501% increase over a decade, or an average annual growth rate of approximately 19.5%. This exponential growth was driven by several interconnected factors: urbanization, the implementation of open enrollment policies in universities, the emergence of a middle class, and the economic boom fueled by the 1970s oil boom.

However, this rapid expansion presented a significant challenge: funding. The state, unable to keep pace with the growth, struggled to adequately finance universities. This financial strain resulted in a decline in academic quality at many higher education institutions across the country.

Despite the expansion, access to university remained primarily limited to middle- and upper-income segments of society who had successfully completed primary and secondary education. The supposed democratization of higher education did not fully materialize for lower socioeconomic strata. Carvajal (2016) points out that while student enrollment increased between 1970 and 1990, free admission presented substantial academic and financial challenges for public universities. Notably, the dropout rate, particularly during the first year, was estimated to be as high as 40%.

It is noteworthy that by the late 1980s, Ecuador had 19 public universities that received full funding from the state. Additionally, there were six co-funded universities that relied on a combination of state subsidies and self-generated income, typically through tuition fees and other sources. Many of these co-funded institutions had roots in Catholic traditions and were often referred to as "missionary universities."

The first comprehensive evaluation of Ecuador's higher education system was conducted between 1987 and 1989, encompassing both public and private uni-

versities and polytechnic schools. The findings of this evaluation revealed structural problems and served as a catalyst for rethinking and revamping the management, policies, and overall direction of higher education in the country (Higher Education Council, 2015).

Neoliberalization

In the 1990s, Ecuador implemented neoliberal policies that worsened economic and social issues. This era also saw the rise of self-financed universities, independent of state funding and funded mainly by tuition fees. Before 1992, Ecuador lacked fully self-financed universities. However, from 1990 to 1999, 18 such universities were established, growing to 35 by 2007 (Beltrán, 2021). In general, these institutions were focused exclusively on teaching, which met a considerable demand for access to higher education. Thus, the commercialization of higher education started with dubious quality standards.

The proliferation of self-funded universities in Ecuador during the 1990s led to a significant surge in overall higher education enrollment. Between 1989 and 2008, the number of enrolled students experienced remarkable growth, increasing from 186,618 to 464,609 (Pacheco, 2011). This represents a substantial increase of 277,991 students, or a 149% growth rate over this period. The phenomenon of the creation of new private institutions occurred at the same time as the deterioration and weakening of public higher education institutions and higher education coordinating bodies, due to the reduction of state funds.

This stage of neoliberalization, taking place in the 1990s, is also characterized by a significant change in the historical relationship between University, State, and Society, manifested in a) the transformation of university financing, b) changes in academic structures (offerings), c) the configuration of a market of students, academics, and management personnel, and d) the incorporation of “values” such as “reputation” and “prestige.” Higher education is regulated by the dynamics of supply and demand in all cases. In this context, neoliberalism not only altered various aspects of the public agenda, but also fundamentally redefined the previous social agreement between education and the State as guarantor and provider of public, quality, non-profit education (Mollis, 2010).

The progressive backlash

In the early 2000s, amid political instability, Latin America witnessed the emergence of a progressive bloc focused on implementing social policies, expanding welfare programs, and promoting regional integration, contrasting with previous neoliberal policies. Ecuador followed suit, electing Rafael Correa in November 2006. Correa convened a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, addressing structural issues such as corruption, social inequality, and unsustainable economic development. During Ecuador’s National Constituent Assembly in 2007-2008, Mandate No. 14 instructed the National Council for Evaluation and Accreditation to assess higher education institutions. Published on November 4, 2009, this report highlighted irregularities and signaled an institutional crisis. The new constitution introduced free education at all levels. This change marked the beginning of an unusual transformation in higher education, guided by two key concepts: quality as a strategy for regulation and control, as well as the importance of expanded higher education access.

Between 2010 and 2013, Ecuador implemented six key decisions in the higher education sector: a) Approval of the new Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES), b) Establishment of a new institutional framework for governing and regulatory bodies in higher education, c) Suspension of 17 private universities and polytechnic schools due to inadequate academic quality, d) Centralization of access to higher education primarily in public universities for allocation of places, e) Establishment of an evaluation and quality assurance system for higher education to enhance educational standards, and f) Initiation of the creation of four public research universities with international reach, known as “flagship universities,” aimed at strengthening research and academic excellence nationwide. Higher education became a priority axis for the construction of the National Development Plan. In accordance with these changes, higher education moved from a peripheral and casual topic to become a source of daily debate in the media, academia, and in public opinion in general.

During the 2015-2017 period in Ecuador, a paradigm shift is observed in the field of higher education. The previous idea about the role of universities yields to new ideas, giving preeminence to the formation of human capital and the development of employability competencies. This new approach to higher education seeks to contribute to national productivity and competitiveness, as well as to generate intergenerational educational mobility, opening spaces for new segments of the middle class that now access educational credentials en masse. The change is reflected in a new law, promoted by the 2008 Constitution. However, critical actors from academia (Carvajal, 2016; Villavicencio, 2013) point to excessive formalism and advocate for a deeper change in university actors, science, technology, and culture policies. They highlight the need for a comprehensive debate on the objectives of higher education, both globally and in each institution, considering its specific functions for the country. They also criticize a “transforming technocratic” tendency, which instead of strengthening academic autonomy, replaced it with a state bureaucracy, ignoring the mission and essence of the university in favor of a kind of academic colonialism that ignored the history of higher education as well as its fundamental role as custodian of knowledge.

Conclusion

This study examines the evolution of higher education in Ecuador since 1979, highlighting the impact of changing state perceptions of universities. While significant progress has been made, challenges in access and quality persist. The key issue is how the State can translate reforms into effective actions to address these problems and improve higher education.

Despite these shifts, persistent challenges in access and quality remain unresolved, raising questions about policy effectiveness and the translation of higher education's perceived importance into tangible practices. Ultimately, how the State effectively translates conceptual changes into impactful measures to address these challenges remains a critical question, necessitating a closer examination of structural limitations and obstacles hindering state-led initiatives in higher education.

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FOCUS ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International student research in China: A new conceptual framework

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Introduction

This paper is drawn from my PhD project about international students' understandings, expectations, and experiences of internationalization in China's English-medium instruction programs. Higher education (HE) worldwide is hosting international students in pursuit of internationalization. According to recent statistics (UNESCO, 2022), over 6.3 million students pursued HE outside their home countries in 2020, up from 2 million in 2000. It is expected that this number will reach 8 million by 2025 (OECD, 2017).

More significant than the increase in international student numbers is the competition posed by newer destinations like China, Singapore, and Malaysia to traditionally popular study destinations (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia) (de Wit, 2015). The former countries, historically regarded as sending countries, are now receiving a large number of international students due to their rapid HE internationalization efforts (Ding, 2016).

China, in particular, has become the top study destination in Asia as of the end of 2017 (MOE, 2018), with international students studying there accounting for a 10% share of the global market (IIE, 2018). However, having large numbers of international students enrolled in China does not equate to a sufficient understanding of their experiences. Some of the predominant critiques of international student research in the Western context include a lack of ways of framing (Heng & Lu, 2023), limited criticality (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021), and dominant deficit narratives (Lomer

& Mittelmeier, 2021). Existing research on international students' experiences in China is no exception. Thus, this paper aims to illustrate limitations in the framings of the existing research as well as to propose a new conceptual framework to broaden conceptual approaches to international student research in China and beyond.

Framings of existing international student research in China

First, up to the early 2010s, there was a lack of theoretical development in this field, with much research on international students' experiences in China being "atheoretical," or "without explicit description, review or re-examination or modification of theories/ concepts/ models/ paradigms in guiding the research or review concerned" (Abdullah et al., 2014, p. 244). This is troubling as theoretical and conceptual frameworks are core to research, guiding how studies are justified and problematized, what questions are asked, what methodologies are selected, and how study results are analyzed, presented, and discussed (Maxwell, 2005). Suffering from a lack of theoretical engagement, research on international students in the Chinese context thus appears underdeveloped.

Second, despite emerging scholarly efforts to engage with theories (e.g., Dai & Hardy, 2022), the framing remains somewhat limited. For example, only a few scholars (e.g., Song, 2023) have framed their work from critical perspectives and engaged with underlying issues of power, inequality, dominance, and ethics. This

limitation is problematic because these issues are crucial for understanding international students' experiences within unequal contexts (Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022).

Third, regardless of theoretical engagement, much of the scholarship on international students' experiences in China has often framed international students from deficit perspectives—focusing on their challenges and what they lack (e.g., He & Chiang, 2016). These deficit framings and narratives are pernicious as they portray international students as inherently problematic, thus limiting the opportunities to understand them in a more complex, multidimensional, or positive way (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). As such, our understanding of international students' experiences in China remains narrow and lopsided.

A new conceptual framework

Given the multifaceted complexities of the Chinese context and the limitations of existing research, I propose a conceptual framework termed the “Critical Glonacal Eye.” This framework is inspired by Chen and Dervin’s (2020) call for “new eyes” to critically examine how internationalization unfolds in China. They critique the tendency of researchers to apply theories, concepts, and methodologies developed for Western contexts to study international students' experiences in China, which they argue is scientifically and ethically problematic. Therefore, studying international students' experiences in China requires a process of “unlearning” preconceived notions about studying abroad and Chinese education, as well as a shift from “what to think” to “rethinking how to think” to engage in different ways of examining an issue that is often seen as “business as usual” (Chen & Dervin, 2020, p. 153).

In this framework, informed by critical and post-colonial theories and perspectives, as well as my own experiences as a Chinese international student and a teacher of international students in China, the Critical Glonacal Eye is guided by four principles:

- 1) *Researching with international students as “epistemic equals”* (Hayes, 2019)
- 2) *Situating international students in the “glonacal” contexts* (Marginson, 2022)
- 3) *Recognizing uneven structural power relations*

impacting international students (Ginelli, 2018; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016)

- 4) *Acknowledging international students' agency* (Cantwell, 2021)

The term “eye” is used metaphorically to underscore the fact that different eyes lead to different views, which, for researchers, could mean different problems perceived, questions asked, methodologies employed, findings obtained, and conclusions made. In the framework, international students are placed in the center, embedded within overlapping and inseparable local, national, and global contexts. Within their local context, international students are not only shaped by but also actively engaging with global and national structural power dynamics.

In practice, this conceptual framework empowers researchers to recognize and respect the perspectives of international students, contextualize their experiences within multiple contexts—i.e., global, national, and local, hence “glonacal”—understand how global and national forces shape their experiences, and acknowledge their agency in negotiating with these structural forces locally. This framework aims to facilitate critical, comprehensive, and multidimensional analysis of international students' experiences in China, illustrating the origins of forces that shape their experiences. It is hoped that this conceptual advancement will enrich our understanding of international students' experiences in non-Anglophone countries and contribute to more equitable internationalization approaches in the future.

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More than absence of speech: Chinese international students' silence in collaborative group work at a U.K. university

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Introduction

Collaborative group work, as a widely used form of instruction in U.K. higher education (de Hei et al., 2020)—one that makes students jointly engage with the substance of the learning task toward a common goal (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995)—is perceived as the ideal vehicle to develop a range of soft skills including communication, empathy, teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership, and self-management (Clarke, 2017). This is especially true in today's globalized and technology-enhanced world of work (McKay & Sridharan, 2024). Such benefits, however, do not automatically result from the mere allocation of students to groups (Jackson, 2015), and implementing collaborative group work is not without its challenges (Sridharan & Boud, 2019). The unsatisfactory and frustrating group-working experience for many students is continually reported in relevant empirical studies (Medaille & Usinger, 2020)—especially in regard to social loafing, free riding (El Massah, 2018), and “sucker” effects (Sridharan, Muttakin & Mihret, 2018)—where the prevailing silence of Chinese international students (CISs) has frequently been interpreted as a sign of passivity (Wang et al., 2022).

Western thought tends to value talking much more than listening and tightly connects talking to thinking. As such, CISs' silence is often assumed equal to an absence of speech and to disengagement (Kim et al., 2016), and CISs are frequently depicted as passive, uncritical, and rote learners (Wang et al., 2012). However, the interpretation of CISs' silence is controversial. Some academics highlight that neither talking nor silence is a proxy of engagement or disengagement and that silence can also indicate engagement in thought (Mclean & Ranson, 2005). Meanwhile, silence has been understood in increasingly more complex ways, in-

cluding as an accompaniment to some verbalizing behaviors (e.g., writing), as an indication of linguistic thought (inner speech), as whispering to oneself (private talk), and as talking to a peer without the intention to share with other peers (insider talk) (Remedios et al., 2008). In this way, silence is not perceived as the absence of talk but as the absence of ideas shared in public; however, more evidence supporting this argument is required (Bao, 2020).

To better understand CISs' silence in collaborative group work with a goal of offering suggestions for further pedagogical practice, I focused on one exploratory research question during the early stages of my PhD project: How do Chinese international students make sense of their silence in collaborative group work?

Methodology

To answer this, a qualitative case study was conducted in the Master of International Education program at a U.K. university, aiming for an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon in this case. Qualitative individual semi-structured interviews with 16 CISs who attended MA courses with summative collaborative group work were conducted after participants submitted group assignments. Acknowledging collaborative group work as “a situation in which particular forms of interaction among people are expected to occur...but there is no guarantee that the expected interactions will actually occur” (Dillenbourg, 1999), this study included participants from two courses in the program—courses that, as shown in course handbooks, required group tasks that encouraged collaboration. Taking individual CISs' silent practice as the unit of analysis, reflexive thematic analysis was adopted for the data analysis.

Findings

Preliminary findings from this study show that all participants had a critical view of group communication. In addition to speaking in the in-person group discussion, messaging and meme usage on social media—including WeChat and WhatsApp—were also perceived as group communication. In contrast to unidirectionally imposing ideas on other peers or following peers' thoughts, participants preferred a balance of communication methods for mutually beneficial idea exchanges.

Participants desired to have more productive group communication, where academic and a small proportion of appropriate social content, such as some polite expression, were legitimated. The former was more valued due to participants' key mission of completing collaborative group work. Meanwhile, participants would avoid commenting on peers' personal affairs, working patterns, and attitudes. They tried to focus instead on the work, as anything else was less likely to bring benefits to the completion of collaborative group assignments and could even possibly cause difficulties.

Instead of characterizing their general state of engaging in collaborative group work, participants perceived silence as a relatively brief behavior or moment in specific collaborative settings. Group dynamics were quite relevant—this included group composition and the roles participants played. This was deduced from participants' frequent descriptions of “I kept silent at that time” and “I had several silent moments” instead of “I was silent.”

Notably, participants frequently reported English as the key obstacle to communicative efficiency due to different expressions and accents. Instead of triggering silence, as much of the literature reveals, speaking English caused more speaking to illustrate and guarantee a correct understanding.

Conclusion

These findings push against the deficit view that CISs are inherently silent with less critical thinking in collaborative group work. Rather, they are good at adjusting their methods of engagement in group work and desire productive communication for mutually benefi-

cial ideas and exchange. Instead of encouraging silence, this urges instructors to recognize the possible contribution of silence in collaborative learning that is often neglected in teaching, to respect the students' different learning manners rather than blindly pursue behavioral participation, and thus give silence a deserved place in pedagogy. Specifically and practically, regarding the pedagogical consideration for the group task design, this study suggests that collaboration should be motivated by the substance of the task to motivate collaboration where students are required to engage with the substance jointly rather than being divided into independent work easily. Additionally, assessment methods could consider both the group work process and the result. For example, a group contract or report summarizing the labor division, individual contribution, an outline of the group communication, and peer comments could also be submitted together with the group assignment as a possible reference for marking.

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Exploring justifiability, inequalities, and inclusiveness of critical thinking's education in Anglocentrism: Chinese international postgraduates' conceptualization of critical thinking and academic identity

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Introduction

This paper is adapted from my PhD project titled “Chinese international postgraduates’ conceptualisation of critical thinking (CT) and academic identity: a longitudinal study.” The study applied academic identity as a theoretical lens to explore Chinese international students’ conceptualization and development of critical thinking throughout the dissertation process at a master’s level in a U.K. university. This research includes three aims: one is to investigate students’ conceptualization of critical thinking, the second is to investigate students’ conceptualization of academic identity, and the third is to explore how students perceive connections between their academic identity and critical thinking throughout the postgraduate dissertation process.

Literature Review

Vaguely focusing on undefined international student experiences (Deuchar, 2022), as well as over-generalizing the international student experience through homogenization and neglecting student diversity (Heng, 2018; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021), are tendencies that are critiqued by some scholars. Existing research literature frequently focuses on international students’ difficulties while studying overseas, which leads to an incomplete or stereotypical picture of these students as incapable and deficient (Heng, 2018; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021; Moosavi, 2022). A few scholars explore their development, thoughts, and actions through an

environmental adaptation lens (Heng, 2020). Finally, there is also a general lack of understanding of the conceptualization and development of critical thinking and identity within an environment where all these factors exist, leading to a specific research gap.

A review of the literature reveals that scholars have debated the definition of CT for more than 200 years. Controversies over the definition of CT have affected the translation, different labels have been generated (Wu et al., 2015), and varying definitions have spread into different countries’ education systems and societies. This study adheres to the consensus definition provided by the Delphi experts:

We understand critical thinking to be a purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as an explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based. (Facione, 1990, p. 2)

Empirical studies regarding Chinese international students’ conceptualization and development of CT are severely lacking (Tian & Low, 2011; Zhong & Cheng, 2021).

Students’ identities and critical thinking skills change with the environment and time, and are interconnected (Pu & Evan, 2019). Identities refer to individuals’ feelings about who they are (Ivanic, 1998), and international students’ identities are shaped by their overseas learning experiences (Bond, 2019). Little is

known by researchers as to how international students conceptualize and develop critical thinking abilities. Likewise, little is known about how they conceptualize and develop their identities. Finally, research fails to address the interconnectedness of CT and identity/identity development.

Methodology

This longitudinal qualitative study aims to understand international Chinese postgraduates' experiences across time and change. Constructivism/interpretivism is used as a theoretical foundation. Nineteen participants were invited to three rounds of interviews: interviews were conducted before starting, in the middle, and after submitting their dissertation. One follow-up email was sent requesting reflective writing after students received dissertation marks and feedback. Participants were encouraged to bring any materials they wanted to share, such as draft assignments or dissertations, as prompts during each round of interviews. Students were encouraged to draw their CT development as a picture.

This study involved 19 universities in China, from north to south to the southern coast, from west to central to east to the eastern coast. There are 6 national universities, 13 provincial key or ordinary universities. Seventeen females and two males participated in the study. The participants' undergraduate majors include English, Education, Business, Chinese Literature, Journalism and Media, and Art Design. Each participant met the admission criteria for the International Education Graduate Program at the University of Manchester in England.

Data are currently being analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2021). The full data analysis was completed in April 2024, and I am still organizing research findings according to my research questions. Therefore, I will share my initial findings in this paper according to my first research question: How do international Chinese students conceptualize critical thinking throughout the dissertation process?

Initial findings and discussion

Initial findings indicate that international Chinese students' conceptualizations of critical thinking are divided into two parts—before and during postgraduate study—showing the dynamic development of their ideas.

Findings mainly reveal that most participants (more than 12 out of 19) expressed that they had not studied critical thinking before postgraduate study. A few participants (one to five participants) in this study expressed that they had received CT education before postgraduate study; however, their conceptualization of CT tends to be diverse, misunderstood, and fragmented compared with scholars' conceptualization of CT in the literature. This may indicate that some Chinese universities choose to focus less on CT during their undergraduate education, which would appear to go against the China Ministry of Education's desire to see the cultivation of more internationally recognized talents and abilities (China Ministry of Education, 2024) in students who are expected to gain critical thinking skills as part of their higher education experience. This finding is surprising because Chinese undergraduate students with little accumulation of CT-related concepts are disadvantaged when they study abroad; they need to spend some time understanding this concept at the beginning of their learning journey or they face great difficulties to adjust (especially when the MA program usually lasts just one year in the U.K. and there are so many life and academic challenges). Critical thinking education is expected to be somewhere before or during master's level education. There is an urgent and timely call for higher education institutions at home and abroad to pay attention and fill this gap for international Chinese students.

During postgraduate study, initial findings mainly reveal that many Chinese international students are misled by CT's Chinese translation. Most of them regard CT as criticizing and aggressively attacking others. For example, one participant said, "This translation is not very good.....it makes me feel like you are trying

to knock him down. A kind of beating feeling.” Some scholars have done empirical studies with similar findings; however, they seem to assume that students could naturally link CT as defined by the Delphi experts with its Chinese translations (Fakunle et al., 2016), which generates a lack of further exploration. My study could possibly confirm that linguistic translation of CT influences Chinese international students’ conceptualization and application of CT in learning.

Last, international Chinese students are expected to gain Euro-American-centered CT in a U.K.-centered education system, which leads to the consideration of equality, diversity, and inclusion in international education. This study would help British universities or even universities worldwide increase their understanding of how Chinese students conceptualize and learn CT, thereby assisting students in transitioning smoothly and successfully into both postgraduate study and professional life. Overall, this study also demonstrates the significance of improving international education’s fairness, inclusiveness, and diversity.

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The journey home through education scholarships: A case study of the repatriation scholarship program for Indonesian immigrant children in Sabah, Malaysia

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Introduction

The desire for a better life compels millions of Indonesians to migrate, often leaving their children facing educational challenges. In Sabah, Malaysia, a significant population of Indonesian migrant workers presents this very situation. The Indonesian government established Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in Sabah to address this gap and provide primary education for these children. However, repatriation remains a concern.

Franc et al. (2020) highlight the significance of repatriation in promoting international trade and cultural exchange among diaspora communities, highlighting the role of these communities as cultural ambassadors. The Indonesian government has launched two scholarship programs, Affirmation of Secondary Education (ADEM) and Affirmation of Higher Education (ADIK), to provide educational opportunities for children of Indonesian migrant workers residing in Sabah. By offering financial support for CLC students to pursue higher education in Indonesia, the Indonesian government aims to reconnect these children with their homeland and foster a stronger national identity. Research suggests that government initiatives targeting diaspora communities can influence national identity (Chacko & Gebre, 2017).

This research delves deeper, examining the repatriation scholarship program's impact beyond motivation for return. Through the lens of integrating national and migrant/transient identities, this study explores how the scholarship program influences the national identity development of Indonesian CLC students in Sabah, Malaysia.

Theoretical framework: Integrating national and migrant/transient identities

National identity theory offers a valuable lens for examining the impact of the Indonesian government's repatriation scholarship program on the national identity development of Indonesian CLC students in Sabah, Malaysia. National identity focuses on shared cultural, historical, and linguistic attributes that bind individuals together as members of a nation (AlMutairi et al., 2018). Key elements of national identity include shared culture, history, and language (AlMutairi et al., 2018; Dinnie, 2001; Eder, 2004). Migration can disrupt a sense of belonging and force individuals to negotiate their national identity in a new context (Eder, 2004). Growing up in Malaysia exposed CLC students to a different culture and language, potentially influencing their initial understanding of Indonesian national identity.

The concept of migrant/transient identities complements national identity theory by highlighting the complexities of belonging for children of migrants. These identities are fluid and evolving, shaped by the reasons for migration, family ties, and experiences in both the home and host countries (Arifianto, 2009; Maher, 1994; Nguyen, 2022; Sibanda, 2010). Gomes et al. (2017) further define transient migrants as mobile individuals or groups who undertake temporary migration for various reasons. This can include individuals who cross borders for study, work, or to be with family. As migrant children navigate these social and cultural landscapes, they may occupy a "liminal space," neither fully integrated into the host country nor fully connected to their country of origin (Kirk et al., 2017). Understanding national and migrant/transient identi-

ties is essential for analyzing the program's impact, as the repatriation initiative may influence their sense of belonging upon returning to Indonesia.

Methodology

Having established the theoretical framework integrating national identity theory and migrant/transient identities, this study employed a qualitative approach to understand the program's impact on students' national identity development. The research involved purposive sampling to recruit a diverse group of participants with relevant experience ranging from current CLC students, CLC alumni, and CLC teachers to liaison coordinators and officials. There were 50 participants total. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. These interviews were conducted in Indonesian, the language most comfortable for the participants.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. This method involves identifying, coding, and analyzing recurring themes within the data that relate to the participants' experiences of national identity and the program's impact. The coding process was iterative, with initial codes refined throughout the analysis to ensure that they accurately captured the participants' voices and experiences.

Results and discussion

This part examines the impact of the Indonesian government's repatriation scholarship program on the national identity development of Indonesian CLC students in Sabah, Malaysia, using the lens of national identity theory and the concept of migrant/transient identities.

The findings support the theoretical framework. National identity is a concept that highlights the collective cultural, historical, and linguistic characteristics that unite individuals within a nation (AlMutairi et al., 2018). On the other hand, migration disturbs the feeling of belonging, compelling individuals to navigate their identity in a different environment (Eder, 2004). Growing up in Malaysia, the different cultural context might have further weakened the participants' initial connection to Indonesian national identity.

Before attending CLCs, many students lacked a solid connection to Indonesia due to limited exposure to the language, culture, and education system. They often saw themselves as outsiders and, like their parents, placed minimal value on education, viewing palm oil plantation work as their future. This aligns with the concept of migrant/transient identities (Gomes et al., 2017). These fluid and evolving identities encompass reasons for migration, family ties, and experiences in both countries (Arifianto, 2009; Sibanda, 2010). CLC students might occupy a "liminal space" (Kirk et al., 2017), neither fully Malaysian nor Indonesian.

CLCs play a crucial role in shaping the national identity of these students. By using the Indonesian language and curriculum and uniforms similar to those in Indonesia, CLCs foster a sense of belonging. This finding aligns with national identity theory, as shared cultural elements strengthen national connections (AlMutairi et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers actively encourage pursuing higher education, opening their students' eyes to possibilities beyond manual labor. This challenges the previously limited view of working in palm oil plantations, a common future both parents and children envision.

The ADEM and ADIK scholarship programs further strengthen national connections. They allow CLC graduates to continue their education in Indonesia, showcasing the government's commitment to its citizens abroad and motivating current CLC students. These scholarships bridge the physical distance and the educational opportunity gap. Education empowers individuals by equipping them with knowledge and skills, fostering self-development and potentially transforming their migrant/transient identities into stronger Indonesian national identities.

The government's efforts to reconnect with migrant workers and their families, including scholarships, aim to create choices beyond working in Malaysia. Scholarship recipients can become role models, inspiring parents to return to Indonesia. Our interviewees wanted to work and live in Indonesia, potentially bringing their families back. This aligns with the idea of a stronger national identity, which leads to a desire to contribute to and be part of the home nation (Chacko & Gebre, 2017).

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of shared cultural elements like language and curriculum in fostering national identity. By providing a foundation for students to connect with their Indonesian heritage, CLCs play a crucial role in this process. Education, further facilitated by scholarship programs, empowers students and transforms their migrant/transient identities. Equipping them with knowledge and skills unlocks possibilities beyond manual labor, potentially leading to a more solidified Indonesian national identity.

Scholarship programs encourage students to consider returning to Indonesia, bridging the educational gap while fostering a stronger sense of national belonging. Scholarship recipients also serve as role models, inspiring students and parents to consider repatriation. In conclusion, this study suggests the Indonesian national scholarship program's powerful potential to strengthen national identity and encourage reintegration into Indonesian society. Understanding national and migrant/transient perspectives, however, remains crucial for analyzing the program's long-term impact, particularly in regard to its effectiveness in achieving repatriation goals.

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Unpacking learning ecologies of online international students: The lived experience of international students taking online master's degree courses provided by a U.K. university

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Online education has expanded for decades, and both the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) that offer online degree courses and the number of international students who enroll in these online courses are increasing. Particularly after the disruption of COVID-19, when higher education shifted to distance learning globally, the education opportunities offered by online courses have become highlighted and valued. For instance, in the U.K., the number of online international students increased by approximately 17% from 2018/19 to 2021/22 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023a), and there has been an increase of more than 35% in the number of HEIs providing distance learning courses from 2014/15 to 2021/22 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023b). This phenomenon can be explained and discussed from the perspective of the internationalization of higher education—particularly internationalization at a distance (IaD), which focuses on the forms of education that reach across borders, i.e., in which students and the education provider are separated geographically (Mittelmeier et al., 2021). Internationalization, as a concept and a strategic agenda, has become a key change agent in higher education, and has been discussed at institutional, sector, and national levels (de Wit, 2023). Internationalization at a distance, as a digital “alternative space” for internationalization, blurs the traditional division of “home” and “host,” offering a potentially useful and effective approach of internationalization supported by technology.

Online courses are believed to provide international education opportunities to students who are not geographically mobile, and universities promote their online courses as offering students the flexibility of

combining learning with other life commitments, granting them access to digital resources, and helping them develop global connections and international networks. Research that captures the experiences of online students (i.e., IaD students), however, is still limited. For instance, from a student perspective, to what extent have promoted aims been achieved? How would IaD students compare their online learning experiences with their “traditional” face-to-face learning experiences?

One approach to unpacking students’ lived experiences is to focus on their perceived learning ecologies, i.e., the contexts in which student learning is mediated and learning objectives are achieved (Sangrá et al., 2019). Considering that IaD students are mainly learning in virtual environments while being affected and influenced by their physical environments, neo-ecological theory, the modified version of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory that reflects the impact of the virtual world (Navarro & Tudge, 2022), is used as the primary analytic framework in this paper. By evaluating IaD student environments through the lens of different “systems,” a better understanding of an individual’s learning ecologies—and tracking the changes during their studies—becomes possible.

This paper aims to unpack the lived experience of international students taking online degree courses at a U.K. university and to understand how these students perceive their learning experience through the lens of their learning ecologies. All participants were taking education-related degree programs at the postgraduate taught (master’s) level. The data was collected and analyzed in two stages:

Stage 1: Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2022, with international students who: (i) took online courses for one year (11 students), (ii) took online courses for one semester, and took onsite courses for the other semester (7 students). This stage provides an insight into IaD students' learning ecologies, with some comparison power of understanding the differences of ecologies of online and onsite students from students who experienced both learning modes. As the purpose of this stage was to provide an overview, I used thematic analysis when reviewing collected data.

Stage 2: Digital diary entries from international students (4 students) reflecting their learning and lives outside of school were collected monthly, and corresponding semi-structured interviews were conducted every 4 months to further unpack their learning ecologies throughout the academic year 2022/23. This stage provides an in-depth understanding of online international students' ecologies, with the power of tracking the changes and developments. At this stage, as the purpose was to uncover detailed information about how students make sense of their experiences and environments, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used.

Findings from both stages demonstrated gaps between students' expected experiences and their actual experiences, and the promoted benefits of online courses were not fully met. Participants believed that the online degree program made the education from a "prestigious U.K. university" affordable and approachable, and were generally satisfied with their experience, but current provisions may not be ideal as all students experienced difficult and challenging times.

Firstly, all participants reflected on their interpersonal relationships, expressing that the online relationships they developed were fragile. Unlike how they would build connections in face-to-face settings, their communications were limited to their studies, and participants felt it hard to recognize their online peers as part of their social circles, even though some close relationships were developed at later stages of their studies. Also, participants' connections with their old friends

were impacted, as they had to invest time in online learning and thus missed opportunities to engage with these old connections. This demonstrates how the virtual and physical microsystems in their environments influenced their experiences, and how the microsystems were connected and impacting each other: online students develop "fragile," virtual interpersonal connections, most related to their studies, while their physical interpersonal connections might be sacrificed for more time spent learning with the university.

Secondly, IaD students had intercultural encounters and learning experiences, but in more trivial ways than students in onsite learning environments. Most intercultural encounters happened when writing emails, discussing material with tutors and peers, learning about assignment requirements, and navigating virtual learning environments. Students learned to behave "professionally" and "academically" from such encounters, and they believe such learning was beneficial for their careers. Although it can be argued that such experiences happened within students' virtual microsystems, students perceived such interactions as culturally related, demonstrating the impact of the host culture, which was believed to be part of student macrosystems according to the biological systems theory.

Thirdly, although technology supported IaD student learning, it also caused challenges. For example, some students had difficulties accessing YouTube when videos were part of teaching materials, and some students experienced unstable internet connection when attending synchronous sessions on Zoom. Difficulties in navigating virtual learning environments were also discussed by the participants, who needed to learn how to use new platforms, and the logic and structure of each learning tool was not always clear. Furthermore, related to the first finding about building interpersonal relationships, using social media or networking platforms to build connections was difficult for students, as extending the conversations beyond studies was difficult if only "meeting" online.

To conclude, online international students can only develop fragile interpersonal relationships, have trivial intercultural experiences, and face challenges caused by technology. There are ways that universities could enhance the experience of IaD students. For example, universities could design courses more practi-

cally, requiring students to bring their professional work into the tasks so that potential connections beyond academic studies can be built. Also, in-person events can be scheduled, so that students have a chance to meet face-to-face and converse in the real world, which is made evident in this research as an effective way of “developing global connections.” Finally, potential technological challenges should be considered when designing courses, such as purposefully selecting tools and platforms so that the classes are more approachable and effective.

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FOCUS ON DOMESTIC STUDENTS

Higher education admission policies in Bangladesh: Enabling upward mobility or reinforcing inequalities?

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Bangladesh has experienced a sharp rise in higher education enrollment in the last three decades. Right now, the gross enrollment rate at the tertiary level is 23 percent, a sixfold figure compared to the four percent in 1990 (World Bank Open Data, 2023). This expansion has been possible through the establishment of new public and private universities and colleges. Private universities started expanding in Bangladesh after the enactment of the Private University Act in 1992 and the government has taken deliberate initiatives to expand access to higher education. The wage premium of college education is still very high and drives both male and female students' higher education enrollment decisions (Ahmed & McGillivray, 2019).

Higher education is one of the most important levers of social mobility in Bangladesh. Since the establishment of the University of Dhaka, the first university in the then east Bengal under the British colonial regime in 1921, universities have played an important role in the development of a middle class in the region (Alam, 2014). Later, the university's influence through the newly developed middle class led to the development of a new national identity and eventually the birth of the nation in 1971 on promises of liberty and equality (Ahmad, 2018). However, whether access to higher education still helps upward mobility or reinforces existing social inequalities in Bangladesh is a question to be asked. Based on personal experience and using a critical perspective, this paper examines how socioeconomically disadvantaged students in Bangladesh face systemic challenges to access high-quality higher education, and thus experience low

access to upward mobility. This paper identifies how the public university admission system poses challenges for students with low socioeconomic status (SES), and why private universities are beyond their reach, leaving them with a college education provided by National University-affiliated colleges, the Open University, or other less prestigious institutions, all of which provide comparatively much lower upward mobility than the best colleges and universities in Bangladesh.

The demand for tertiary education has significantly increased with the increasing number of higher secondary graduates in Bangladesh. More than one million students graduated higher secondary or its equivalent in 2022 alone (BANBEIS, 2023) and almost 5.3 million students are enrolled at the tertiary level at present. However, only 37.58 percent of tertiary students are enrolled at universities, and private universities serve only 30 percent of these university students. Moreover, among public university students, around 60 percent are enrolled in Open University, a specialized distance-learning university. A major portion of the remaining students is served by another specialized university, the National University, which certifies all local-level public and private college students around the country (BANBEIS, 2023). Only a fraction of tertiary students are enrolled in prestigious higher education institutions.

Public universities in Bangladesh are fully funded by the government and highly prestigious. Due to this full funding, prestige, and comparatively higher probability of social mobility, many students apply for admission at these selective institutions (Hasan & Hosen,

2022). Instead of having a comprehensive enrollment policy that considers the merit, potential, interests, and lived experience of individuals, these selective institutions, including medical colleges and engineering universities, make admission decisions based on two factors. The major factor is obtained marks in university entrance tests, and the comparatively lower weighted factor is GPA in high-stakes public examinations such as the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations (Mahmud et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2004).

High-stakes university entrance examinations and a higher secondary education that do not prepare students sufficiently for these examinations leave students with little choice but to seek additional support. Most students opt for private tuition and coaching to prepare for admission tests (Alam & Forhad, 2023). The high cost of quality private tuition and coaching disadvantages low SES students. Moreover, coaching centers are centralized, run mostly by current university students from prestigious universities situated in the capital and, in some cases, the divisional cities. Students interested in these external support measures must therefore relocate. Low SES students are less likely to be able to pay for the higher living costs in the capital or other divisional cities. They end up being less prepared than their comparatively advantaged peers to ace the high-stakes entrance examinations.

Even if low SES students receive help from alternative sources and manage to prepare themselves for entrance examinations, they face other challenges. In Bangladesh, students have to apply for public university admission tests, in most cases multiple times, paying for different faculties (called units) for each university. Another concerning factor is that, despite recent initiatives to offer grouped entrance examinations, public universities traditionally offer separate entrance examinations at their own campuses. To sit for entrance examinations, students have to travel to campuses situated in different parts of the country. If unit exams do not fall on the same day, students have to stay in the city for multiple days, where costs are high. Only socio-economically advantaged students can bear the cost of attending multiple tests for multiple universities.

Private universities charge a significantly higher price for education. The majority of these institutions

are situated in the capital or other divisional cities with high living costs. Unlike public universities, most private universities lack residential facilities for students. In addition to higher tuition, the high living cost of attending private universities results in a higher net cost. Despite some students getting scholarships, private universities are not feasible for most of the students from low-income families.

Having lower chances of getting into public universities and facing a high cost for private university education, low SES students in Bangladesh are left with public and private colleges under the National University and the Open University. Despite serving a major portion of the student body, the quality of the local public and private colleges under the National University is low (Alam et al., 2014). In most cases, these institutions are not well-resourced and face challenges due to the shortage of faculty members, laboratories, and other facilities. These institutions also provide low social mobility. Consequently, low SES students are filtered through the higher education admission system and left with a lower chance of upward mobility.

The pattern of unequal access and participation in higher education is well researched in different contexts. Taking parent's education as a proxy for income, Weedon and Riddell (2012) found that in all European Union member states, children of well-off families are more likely to receive higher education. Tilak (2015) found that the gross enrollment ratio in higher education is highest in the highest income class and lowest among low-income groups. In East-Asian countries, Marginson (2018) found that there is disparity in higher education access, and that higher education is not driving social mobility at an expected level.

Universities in Bangladesh need to remove systemic barriers by revising admission policies to make quality higher education equally accessible to all students. The stakes of admission tests should be reevaluated, and a holistic admission system needs to be adopted by both public and private universities. Moreover, private universities can implement a need-based tuition fee waiver system. The government can experiment with funding initiatives for students with financial need studying at private institutions. Simultaneously, institutions under the National University need to be better regulated to ensure quality ed-

ucation. The courses and programs at these institutions should be redesigned based on market demands and the needs of society so that they can create social mobility opportunities for the large population they serve. It is high time that the government of Bangladesh adopts system level reform initiatives that expand access to high quality higher education for all, enabling the country's interested and promising youth to contribute to future nation building.

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Analyzing the potential impact of global disruptions on access equity in South African higher education: A risk mapping approach

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Introduction

Global disruptions—including state funding reductions, reliance on online teaching post-COVID-19, restrictive immigration policies, climate disasters, and conflict—adversely impact higher education enrollments, particularly for disadvantaged students (Atherton, 2021; Banerjee, 2020; Chen et al., 2023; Gardi, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020). These issues, while global, affect countries uniquely based on their context, which includes economic, environmental, social, and political factors (OECD, 2021). This paper seeks to evaluate and assess the risks associated with disruptions in higher education, specifically within the context of South Africa, with a concentrated focus on access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In South Africa, apartheid's legacy continues to create inequities in higher education, disadvantaging students from rural areas and lower economic classes especially (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014; Timmis et al., 2019). Although successful efforts have been made to increase enrollment post-1994 (Maringe, 2022), global disruptions can undo the progress made in access to higher education. It is important to outline the country-specific situation and evaluate the potential impact of each change on higher education fairness.

Methodology

This paper utilizes secondary data from various publications to assess the severity of disruptions on higher education equity in South Africa, employing a methodology similar to the PESTEL (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental) analysis by

Green and McCann (2020) for U.S. universities. The severity of each disruption is rated based on its potential impact on access equity, considering South Africa's unique PESTEL context.

The rating scale for severity, independently developed for this study, includes the following benchmarks:

- ▶ **Low severity:** Disruptions causing minor or localized impacts that do not significantly affect overall access to higher education for disadvantaged groups.
- ▶ **Medium severity:** Disruptions causing notable impacts that can be managed with some intervention but do not completely hinder access for disadvantaged groups.
- ▶ **High severity:** Disruptions causing major, widespread impacts that severely hinder access to higher education for disadvantaged groups and require urgent and significant interventions.

To develop this rating scale and the subsequent analysis, the following steps were taken:

1. **Selection of documents:** Relevant documents were selected based on their focus on higher education disruptions in South Africa. These included government reports, academic articles, policy briefs, and news articles. Documents that lacked specific information on the impacts of disruptions or that were not relevant to the South African context were excluded.

2. **Keywords used:** Keywords such as “higher education,” “disruptions,” “South Africa,” “equity,” “funding cuts,” “online learning,” “immigration policies,” “climate disasters,” and “conflicts” were used to search for relevant publications.

Results

The assessment of disruptions on higher education equity in South Africa revealed varying degrees of severity based on the developed rating scale. Table 1 summarizes the findings, highlighting the severity levels and potential impacts of each identified disruption. The mitigating or exacerbating issues for each observed disruption are discussed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential impacts.

Table 1: South African higher education access equity disruption severity index

Funding (Economic)	High	National Treasury plans to cut National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding in 2024 by R13 billion, posing a significant threat to equitable access, particularly for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Damons, 2023).
Technological shifts	Medium	While many universities in South Africa have turned to blended learning, this mode excludes many rural people due to a lack of resources to connect to the internet and the learning management system, and not having the required software (Dube, 2020).
Pandemic impact (Environmental)	Medium	With the COVID-19 pandemic having subsided, and the National State of Disaster lifted on 5 April 2022 (DoH, 2022), all universities are now fully operational. However, access to online teaching and learning platforms and resources for students from poor rural communities in South Africa was challenging during the pandemic (Landa et al., 2021) and this can be an issue if another pandemic occurs.
Immigration policies (Legal)	Low	Slow issuance of South African student visas resulting from the Covid-19 visa-processing backlog (Quinlan, 2022) can impact international student mobility, affecting diversity and potentially disrupting funding streams.
Climate-related events and conflicts (Environmental and Political)	Low	While fall floods and storms may have occurred recently in three coastal provinces (Vollgraaff, 2023), their impact on South African higher education is relatively lower compared to other disruptions in this context. In the same vein, xenophobic violence and unrest have been experienced in the past (Bax, 2021; HRW, 2021), but these are less likely to severely impact higher education access.

Source: Author’s creation from literature.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that financial challenges are the most critical, with potential for severe negative consequences on access equity. Other disruptions are rated as medium or low severity. It is essential for the government to prioritize financial issues and adopt proactive measures to prevent funding cuts from reversing post-apartheid equity gains in higher education.

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The role of social capital in expanding higher education access for Nepali Dalits

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Introduction

This study examines how social networks and relations, also known as social capital, influence the higher education access of Nepali Dalits. Dalits are a marginalized population from South Asia. They are an educationally disadvantaged, politically disenfranchised, economically exploited, and socially excluded population (UNDP, 2008). The study further explores how Nepali Dalits construct and interpret their higher education experience in terms of the perceived impact of social capital on both their access to higher education and social mobility.

Dalits represent one of the world's largest marginalized populations, with an estimated 260 million Dalits worldwide facing caste-based discrimination (Nepali, 2019; UNHR, 2021). For example, according to the 2011 Census, Dalits make up approximately 13% (3.6 million) of the total Nepali population, and approximately 16% (201 million) of total Indian population (IDSN, n.d.). Despite the substantial Dalit population, only a small portion of Dalits have access to higher education. For instance, just 1.4% of Nepali Dalits are enrolled in higher education (Gandhari, 2021).

This research aims to address a critical social issue rooted in caste-based hierarchical social stratification, which is significant not only within the context of Nepal and South Asia but also has global implications for higher education access and social mobility among historically disadvantaged and minority communities worldwide.

Theoretical/Conceptual framework

The study was framed using critical theory and social constructionism. Critical theory challenges the idea of neutral or objective knowledge, providing a powerful

lens for critically examining society and addressing questions of social change (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This framework plays a crucial role in understanding and critiquing the systemic discrimination faced by Dalits. Within this study, critical theory serves as a fundamental framework, enabling us to explore the complex caste-based social hierarchical system. Though I utilized critical theory in a general sense for this pilot study, I plan to expand this framework in my dissertation research.

Social constructionism offers an interpretive framework that helps to understand the concept of “untouchability” and the discrimination faced by Dalits within the complex caste hierarchy. The fundamental principle of social constructionism asserts that our understanding of the world is a product of human thought, language, and interaction rather than being rooted in a directly observable and clearly definable external reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2019).

Social capital, one of the three essential forms of capital—alongside economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018)—is defined as the capital emerging from social networks or relations. Essentially, it comprises the social connections and resources accessible to individuals or groups through their relationships and interactions within a community or society (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998).

Social capital plays a pivotal role in providing education access to Dalits, fostering agency and empowerment (Bishwakarma, 2019; Jeffrey et al., 2004; Kamat & Sedwal, 2008; Koirala, 1996; Still, 2011). For example, if parents possess strong social capital, it can be passed down to their children, providing them with an advantage in exploring further educational opportunities.

Methodology

The following research questions guided this study.

- ▶ How do college-educated Nepali Dalits describe their journey toward and their experiences of higher education in the United States?
- ▶ In what ways do college-educated Nepali Dalits perceive the role of a college/university degree in their social mobility?

This study employed narrative inquiry as a methodological approach to understand how the research participants construct and give meaning to their experiences through storytelling. The approach explores the multifaceted connections between individuals and their world within the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry: sociality, temporality, and place (Clandinin, 2016).

The method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), conducted over Zoom with four Nepali Dalits residing in the U.S. who completed a higher education degree at a U.S. institution(s). The participants were purposefully sampled (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The research utilized the thematic analysis method to analyze qualitative data, focusing on identifying patterns and themes in the data. Thematic analysis, being a widely utilized method in narrative analysis, is often considered the most straightforward and attractive approach in applied settings (Riessman, 2008).

During the thematic analysis, I initially reviewed interview transcriptions to analyze data for themes, patterns, or constructed categories (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For that, I read and re-read transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the data. Then, I generated initial codes for the data. A code is typically a word or short phrase that represents a summarizing, prominent, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a segment of language-based or visual data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Some of the codes found in the data include caste-discrimination, empowerment, network, family support, and mentorship.

Then I grouped the related codes into different broader themes. For instance, I grouped the codes -network, friends, guidance, mentorship, and information sources- under the broader theme of “social capital.” Subsequently, I reviewed and defined themes to align with research questions and the overall story told by the participants. Finally, similar themes were consolidated into main categories or themes.

Research Findings

The research findings suggest that social capital is crucial for higher education access and social mobility among Nepali Dalits. Participants’ stories emphasized that higher education opens multiple doors for economic opportunities and empowerment, thereby expanding their social capital. Their narratives revealed that social capital enhances higher education access, and in turn, higher education enriches their social capital.

For instance, one participant mentioned that his social and family networks helped him discover educational opportunities and resources to support higher education. Similarly, another participant explained that students from dominant castes (non-Dalits) benefit from a wider and richer social network so that “...they [non-Dalit students] receive mentorship from their family members across generations, but that type of mentoring and networking is lacking in the case of Dalits.”

Despite facing social discrimination and financial challenges, participants accessed higher education by leveraging their social networks and family relations. Thus, social capital is vital for Dalits’ access to education, development of agency, and empowerment. Possessing social capital not only facilitates better education but also empowers them to advocate for social justice.

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Gender-based violence at a large public university in India: Voices of women students

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Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to acts of violence that are underpinned by gendered norms and stereotypes, such as sexual harassment, rape, homophobic violence, bullying, and corporal punishment (Parkes, 2015). It is a human rights violation that continues to be a part of everyday lives for students in schools and universities across the globe, with potentially devastating consequences for individuals, organizations, and societies. Despite its prevalence and the urgent need to address it, GBV remains a hidden dimension of women college students' experience in India due to institutional gatekeeping and the taboo surrounding sex (Dunne et al, 2003). My research addresses this gap by exploring how the experiences of women students with GBV at a large public university in India—henceforth called Indian University (IU)—are shaped by the institution's *structural* and *cultural* characteristics. I employ the terms “structure” and “culture” as heuristic tools to separate the formal limitations on institutional stakeholders—such as the legal mechanisms for reporting cases, the curriculum, and the infrastructure (=structure)—from the largely unspoken collective assumptions, values, norms, and attitudes that guide individuals' thoughts and actions in an organization (=culture) (Janićijević, 2013). While organizations may contain within them multiple sub- and counter- structures and cultures (Lumby & Foskett, 2016), the terms are used as starting points of analysis to uncover the nexus between systemic injustices and students' experiences with GBV.

Methodology: Feminist intersectional narrative inquiry

My research was a two-year-long narrative inquiry that employed a feminist intersectional framework to un-

derstand women students' experiences with GBV at IU. As a victim-survivor of GBV from India, I was aware of the challenges associated with researching such a sensitive and stigmatized topic within a university space. I thus wanted to prioritize an ethics of care and reciprocity when designing the study. A feminist approach to narrative inquiry helped me prioritize such an ethic of care by minimizing the difference between the researcher and the researched, and centering the importance of personal stories as generative tools for social transformation (Ballantine, 2021). Specifically, I used focus group discussions and narrative interviews in tandem with art-based methods to decenter hierarchy, foster reciprocity, and provide agency to the participants. An intersectional approach to narrative research was adopted to better understand the relationship between multiple dimensions of social relations and subject formation across female students' experiences with GBV, specifically with reference to their gender, sexual orientation, and religious identity (McCall, 2005).

Findings

Participant narratives revealed that two aspects of the institutional culture—i.e., high power distance between students/faculty and the ideological influence of right-wing politics—sustained interpersonal violence by legitimizing and normalizing abuses against students. A high power distance exists in societies where those in less powerful positions, such as students or workers, accept and expect that power will be unequally distributed in society (Hofstede, 2013). My analysis demonstrated that the existence of high power distance between the students and faculty at IU made students fearful of reporting those faculty who perpetrated GBV, as shown through the excerpts below:

In my college, I don't think it was our peers who were engaging in gender-based violence of sorts, I think it mostly came for higher authorities, so that is something that is not usually talked about. Especially in India, where the hierarchy is quite clear. Here, we don't really go against our elders, we don't really talk back...all these are linked to issues of authority

There is a very important thing to note here, when we talk about what makes professors do this (verbal abuse) is that we as Indian students have been taught from the very beginning that we have to respect our elders. So, that thing, in itself gives elders the power, so there comes the thing where the elder person gets the autonomy to demean the younger person in whatever way they wish to...

Scholars such as Kakar (1991) have drawn attention to the anti-intellectual and authoritarian tendencies implicit within such a hierarchical structure between teachers and students (cited in Raina, 2000, p. 193), which in turn promotes a hidden curriculum of silence and obedience around abuse. Additionally, several Muslim and Queer women students shared that they experienced fear and distrust when reporting GBV due to the overwhelming presence of right-wing affiliated members within the administrative staff, whom they felt largely ascribed to an anti-gay and/or anti-Muslim agenda:

The thing is, who will you complain to [about homophobic violence]? The administration? The administration is the one who does all the dirty work of right BJP/RSS...The administration has no regards for these [LGBTQ+] issues... the entire admin is made up of the RSS...those who support the Modi government, the whole Hindutva ideology.

(Queer student participant)

It [physical violence against Muslims] is because our principal is supporting these RSS people...our principal is RSS... he actually

participates in BJP rallies...so if any issue happens in college, then it will go in their [perpetrator's] favor

(Muslim student participant)

Hindutva is a political ideology associated with the ruling conservative Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an all-male Hindu nationalist group formed in the 1920s (Ellis-Petersen, 2022). Often used as synonymous with Hindu nationalism, the ideology advocates for Hindu Supremacy, seeking to transform India from a secular nation to a Hindu Rashtra. With the ascension of the conservative BJP to power in India, public universities across India have witnessed an increase in right-wing Hindu nationalism, which has translated into renewed attacks on Muslim and queer students across campuses ("Muslim Students Called Terrorists, Attacked by ABVP," February 15, 2023). As another focus group participant shared:

It [right-leaning management] has a huge impact. Not just on the LGBTQ student, but on the other minorities as well. Like, Dalit-Adivasi, Muslims, Christians... they don't feel comfortable here...there was this case about a woman who was murdered by her Muslim boyfriend...ABVP put up posters of Love-Jihad in the college and how we should keep women away from Muslims...and despite written complaints by SFI... No action was taken against the ABVP, whatever they did, and no condonement of it... it was basically promoted...Not officially...but it happened.

I conceptualize the high-power distance culture and the right-wing ideology together as a form of institutional betrayal that led to the creation of conditions for the perpetuation of interpersonal violence amongst students by a) emboldening the perpetrators due to lack of action and b) generating fear and distrust of leadership amongst students, which prevented them from reporting GBV. Institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014) occurs when trusted and powerful institutions (e.g., schools, churches, military, government, etc.) act in ways that harm those dependent on them for safety and well-being. Within the specific context of GBV, institutional betrayal often takes the form of

omission of protective, preventative, or responsive institutional actions (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Implications

The findings illuminate how institutional culture within universities can contribute to making direct violence against students “look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong” (Galtung, 1990, p. 291), thereby constituting a form of “institutional betrayal” (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Within the specific context of the Indian University, this betrayal manifested in the form of a high-power distance culture between faculty and students, and the influence of conservative politics on the campus culture. Based on these findings, I argue for a) the need for fostering democratic and non-hierarchical learning spaces within universities in India and b) the minimization of political interference within critical aspects of university functioning to prevent the abuse of power by those in powerful positions (e.g., staff and faculty). At the global level, the findings underscore the importance of a holistic and ecological approach to studying and policymaking around GBV in university spaces that takes into account the interplay of personal, situational, and sociocultural factors when seeking to understand and interpret GBV (Heise, 1998).

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FOCUS ON STAFF AND FACULTY

Between neutrality and Caesarism: The role of university presidents in shaping institutional identity

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Introduction

University presidents “live in a glass house,” constantly under scrutiny and criticism from all sides, said Oliver Cromwell Carmichael, former president of the University of Alabama (Carmichael, 1947, p. 685). Seventy-seven years later, this statement still resonates, as university presidents in the U.S. navigate one of the most challenging periods since the 1960s and 1970s. However, unlike the challenges then, prompted by the Civil Rights Movements and the Vietnam War—major events directly involving the U.S.—the current dilemma pertains to upholding institutional neutrality over international conflicts, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that reached a height in October 2023. This essay explores the evolving role of university presidents in shaping institutional identity amidst geopolitical conflicts and introduces Academic Caesarism as an outcome of deviating from institutional neutrality and academic freedom.

Sailing under false colors

As academic institutions navigate the complex landscape of geopolitical conflicts, concerns arise that they might be “sailing under false colors,” presenting themselves as bastions of academic freedom and impartiality while also succumbing to external pressures that push them toward adopting certain political stances (American Association of University Professors., 1915, p. 293). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has permeated U.S. academic institutions like never before, placing university presidents at the forefront of an unprecedented storm. Over many decades of this ongoing conflict, academic leaders have refrained from issuing

official responses following any attack from either side, even amid widespread campus protests or solidarity statements from various departments. However, this tradition took an abrupt turn in October 2023, when several university presidents issued public statements expressing solidarity with Israel.

This departure from institutional neutrality has sparked debates about the consistency of principles and standards in university responses to international conflicts, with critics denouncing the shift as a “racist double standard” that reflects pressures to conform to external expectations at the expense of academic integrity (UC Ethnic Studies Faculty Council, 2023). This raises questions about the real motives behind issuing such statements. Are these responses truly driven by principles, or are they merely a representation of the U.S. government’s foreign policy agenda? Notably, the only international conflicts deemed worthy of response by university leadership were addressed by condemning Russia in 2022, opposing the Iranian regime the same year, and expressing support for Israel in 2023. Meanwhile, conflicts in countries with no direct interest to the U.S. went unnoticed, such as those in Sudan, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria, and Yemen, the last being termed “the world’s worst humanitarian crisis” (UNFPA, 2020). Issues in such countries were only addressed when they were not political in nature, such as Türkiye/Syria’s earthquake and Beirut’s explosion. Such selectivity in institutional neutrality invites scrutiny of the overarching principles and the prioritization of human rights versus political considerations within academic institutions.

A dilemma of institutional neutrality

Before 2022, academic leaders in the U.S. followed the Chicago Principles of institutional neutrality. Concerning international issues, the Chicago Principles emphasize institutional responsibility to foster open debates on critical issues rather than settle them. As articulated by the Kalven Report in 1967, “the university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic” (Kalven et al., 1967, p.1). However, the decision to issue public statements condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 created a precedent that made a return to institutional neutrality challenging. This shift from institutional neutrality was further demonstrated in 2023 when a large number of institutions expressed support for Israel.

Looking ahead, academic leaders face a dilemma: Should they adopt a unified stance of institutional neutrality, address *all* international issues irrespective of their relevance to the U.S. government’s foreign policy agenda, or should they continue with selective engagement? Does the risk of succumbing to political and financial influences—potentially creating Academic Caesars who wield authoritative control within our academic institutions—outweigh the benefits?

Institutional theory and university leadership decisions

Institutional theory and institutional isomorphism provide a theoretical framework for understanding the similarity in management practices within higher education when addressing international conflicts. Old institutional theory, using the terms mimetic isomorphism and coercive isomorphism, explains how external factors elicit homogeneous responses from organizations (Manning, 2017). Neo-institutional theory expands on this by clarifying that academic institutions are not stand-alone organizations, and academic leaders are not “sponges or pawns,” but are rather part of a broader context where they respond to challenges and pressures from larger institutions to conform to specific standards (Dacin et al., 2002, p. 50; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Both formal and informal coercive forces from entities such as politicians, Congress, donors, and alumni wield significant influence on academic institutions, affecting decision-making processes and

often causing institutions to divert from their original mission and policies to mimic other institutions, or risk facing skepticism.

Academic Caesarism: Navigating autonomy and authority

Caesarism, in the sociological conceptualization of Max Weber, and the political conceptualization of Antonio Gramsci, describes a charismatic, dictatorship-like authority tasked with arbitrating conflicting forces within evolving governance (Baehr, 1986; Gramsci, 1971). This form of leadership, both in the Weberian and the Gramscian views, is portrayed as “normal, not a crisis” (Baehr, 1986, p.139).

In the contemporary academic landscape, there is a growing perception that universities “require a champion, the Academic Caesar,” to respond to the current pressures facing higher education (Fuller, 2016, p. 1). However, historical evidence from the 1960s presents cautionary examples, showing how the concentration of power in the hands of university presidents jeopardizes the autonomy of academic constituencies and leads to problematic outcomes, especially during contentious times. Notable instances include President Smith’s decisions at San Francisco State College, President Clark’s student expulsions and faculty removals at Southern University, and Chancellor Murphy’s withdrawal of on-campus recognition for the student chapter of the NAACP at the University of California Los Angeles.

Concerns about Academic Caesarism are not just historical. Since October 2023, some universities have modified their institutional political activity policies to grant presidents more authority, often at the expense of academic freedom and free speech. This trend has led to increased police presence on campuses during student protests, resulting in hundreds of arrests of both students and faculty members. Recent examples highlight the ongoing risks of unchecked administrative power and its detrimental impact on the democratic functioning of universities.

Conclusion

University presidents stand at a crossroads, balancing the expectation of being non-political figures who safe-

guard academic freedom and free expression with their role as civic leaders engaging with broader societal issues (Henderson, 1968). Navigating this dual role becomes particularly challenging as universities become more dependent on external funding. The shift toward Academic Caesarism has elevated university presidents from being mere “footnotes” (Cole, 2018, p.80) to leaders who are seizing the headlines as they assume increasing authority in addressing and steering through contemporary political conflicts. The challenges faced by university presidents today are multifaceted, requiring careful consideration of the delicate balance between institutional neutrality and academic leadership.

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The hyper(in)visible minority: Taking a closer look at international faculty in the United States

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Driven by a dynamic string of global economic, political, and cultural forces emerging over the past half century, internationalization now steers the reform agenda of U.S. higher education (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). The American Council on Education monitors the trajectory of this reform through a quinquennial study entitled, “Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses,” which examines trends over time and identifies priorities for American colleges and universities. Many institutions included in the study list “diversifying students, faculty, and staff at the home campus” as an internationalization priority (Helms & Brajkovic, 2017, p. 5). While plenty of scholarly work looks at the international mobility of students, less literature explores the international mobility of faculty. The paucity of academic attention given to international faculty exemplifies the ambiguous space that these individuals occupy within U.S. higher education.

The ambiguity that international faculty must navigate likely stems from inconsistent employment data reporting. The exact number of international individuals working at U.S. higher education institutions can only be estimated (Gahungu, 2011; Kim & Jiang, 2021), with estimates varying widely. Moreover, national datasets such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) tend to report the residency (rather than the country of birth) of international faculty, which would naturally exclude many academics born outside of the United States who may have gained U.S. citizenship through naturalization (Kim & Jiang, 2021). Case in point, NCES (2021) classified 50,628 or approximately six percent of all faculty as non-resident aliens in fall 2019. That same year the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* showed that the U.S. hosted 136,563 international scholars who were either teaching or conducting research at an American college and university (Institute of International Educa-

tion, 2019). However, Furuya et al. (2019) estimated that 393,100 professors or 22 percent of all faculty in U.S. higher education institutions were foreign-born. These varying statistics show inconsistencies in who counts as an international faculty member. These inconsistencies also indicate the need for further research to better ascertain the role of international faculty in the U.S. academic labor market. Though international faculty may presumably be a well-represented group in American academia, missing and omitted data on employment reports tell a different story—a story of a hyper(in)visible minority.

The story of international faculty in U.S. higher education tells of dual realities. From one perspective, international faculty serve as workhorses, producing cutting-edge research, increasing campus diversity, and advancing the internationalization initiatives of American colleges and universities. These contributions showcase their *hypervisibility*. From another perspective, international faculty remain largely removed from discourses, scholarship, and data on their lived experiences, indicating invisibility. For both terms, the root word visibility refers to the extent to which an individual is fully regarded and recognized by others (Brighenti, 2007; Settles et al., 2019; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). The concept of visibility provides a useful tool for understanding how and why certain individuals have more of a voice than others. While presence (i.e., simply being in the room) certainly plays into visibility, true visibility signifies an innate ability to control how one is perceived and represented in a space (Settles et al., 2019).

Though vulnerable populations like international faculty on U.S. college campuses may seek to increase their visibility as a means of gaining power and recognition (Simpson & Lewis, 2005), garnering too much visibility—or hypervisibility—can be disempowering

(Brighenti, 2007; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). As Ryland (2013) warns, hypervisibility attracts “scrutiny based on perceived difference, which is usually (mis)interpreted as deviance.” For international faculty, hypervisibility manifests as “Otherness,” engendering difficulties with student engagement, feelings of loneliness, and cultural hardships associated with migrating to a foreign country (Alberts, 2008; Collins, 2008; Omiteru et al., 2018). In essence, hypervisibility strips an individual of the power to control how they are perceived by others (Brighenti, 2007; Lewis & Simpson, 2010).

As alluded to above, visibility and invisibility both denote power, particularly around who has it and who does not. Dominant groups have the power to exert control over their visibility whereas subordinated groups have limited to no power over their visibility, rendering them invisible. Invisibility disadvantages subordinated group members by denying them recognition, authority, and voice (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Settles et al., 2019). Invisibility also works in the favor of dominant groups, reinforcing their norms as the expectation and allowing them to maintain their power and authority (Simpson & Lewis, 2005). Altogether, dominant groups can leverage visibility (or the lack thereof) to maintain their privilege by delegitimizing the norms and practices of subordinated groups.

As noted earlier, visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility can occur simultaneously, meaning they are not mutually exclusive states of being. Context may also influence visibility; an individual may be invisible in one context yet hypervisible in another. International faculty often shift between all three states. In this way, international faculty must navigate an amorphous and ambiguous space of *hyper(in)visibility*. On any given day, international faculty may find themselves as the hypervisible “Other,” visible “scholar,” and invisible “number.” Further, *hyper(in)visibility* is relational and transactional in nature, implying that individuals with power can decide when to blend in (i.e., showing invisibility) and when to stand out (i.e., showing visibility) (Stead, 2013). As a subordinated group, however, international faculty usually do not have the luxury of deciding their visibility status in a given context. As Theobald (2008) cautions, international faculty constitute a vulnerable—or *hyper(in)visible*—population that need tailored support to confront the particular

challenges facing foreigners in the United States, including cultural differences and immigration issues. That said, building support systems for international faculty first requires acknowledging their ambiguity within established datasets.

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Doing the heavy lifting: Exploring the experiences of a group of working-class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities

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At present, research that seeks to understand social class-based experiences at universities in the United Kingdom has focused predominantly on the experiences of working-class academics and working-class students (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). There is currently a large gap in the available research evidence base, which has not yet addressed the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). In fact, professional services voices rarely feature in academic literature regardless of social class background, and their experiences tend to be framed through the notions of professional identity, human capital, and their primary function within the institution (Caldwell, 2022).

This paper outlines findings of an EdD thesis that was undertaken between 2021 and 2024. Using semi-structured interviews combined with a narrative inquiry approach and a Bourdieusian lens, the experiences of 13 working-class professional services employees at Russell Group universities were collected using an in-depth and interpretivist qualitative methodology (Bourdieu, 1979; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Ruslin et al., 2022). Russell Group universities are a self-styled elite group of 24 research intensive universities. They often demand the highest grades for entry yet are also diverse in their composition and environment. The group includes institutions such as the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, and the University of Manchester (Hemsley-Brown, 2015).

This paper touches briefly on the complexities of defining social class in the 21st century in the U.K. (Pilgrim-Brown, 2023). It predominantly focuses, however, on the daily working and lived experiences of those working in professional services and administrative roles. It seeks to contribute to knowledge by investigat-

ing the complexities of organizational culture through the experiences that professional services staff have working day to day in Russell Group universities.

All participants reported generally good relationships with others in professional services teams and the working-class students that they encountered, often because they actively sought to help these students navigate complicated and unfamiliar environments. Where participants mentioned relationships with students from other social class backgrounds and academics, these relationships were reported with a distinctly negative framing. Through conducting this research, it became apparent that the working-class professional services staff in this sample were often subjected to negative behavior and a distinct lack of respect. This manifested through experiences of derogatory and disparaging conduct, which was experienced by participants and perpetuated by some academics and students from other social class backgrounds (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). When participants were asked what the least enjoyable part of their role was, the common response was unequivocally the relationships they had with academics. Participants referred to these negative behaviors as being a result of a higher degree of value placed on academics, a sense that academics were the ones who were “shining,” a lack of regard for professional services work, and a sense that professional services staff could be used to carry out often demeaning and non-contracted work, even while ill or on leave (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). The mechanisms at play that demonstrate this lack of value include direct examples of poor behavior toward professional services staff (shouting, speaking in a derogatory way), using deferential language, not valuing professional services voices in meetings and placing expectations on staff which

were unreasonable or unfeasible (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024).

At times where professional services colleagues demonstrated instances of speaking up (which does not seem to be a normative course of behavior for working-class staff members), they were ignored, told to get on with their work, or actively discouraged from raising a concern. They therefore felt that they were not taken seriously within their working environment. Not feeling fully included in the culture of the organization in which they worked materialized in different ways across this study. Many of the participants in this study were highly qualified individuals, often with a PhD or Master's degree, and yet they often felt they were unable to progress in their careers due to lacking further qualification or because they faced limited career trajectories with dead ends. In these instances, technical colleagues expressed their dissatisfaction that future promotion would have to come at the expense of people management, even though their expertise was in explicit functional roles such as in IT development and programming. It was also clear that where universities were making big decisions, such as relocating a campus, that they had not implemented a mainstreaming framework and therefore failed to take into consideration the impact these policy changes would have on people from different demographic backgrounds.

Not feeling included in the cultural fabric of the university was explored through cultural tastes and preferences. Participants felt that there were dominant cultural norms that they were unable to relate to. Many spoke about their inability to engage in conversations about art, theater, opera, or "high culture," as well as a lack of understanding about classical antiquity or an inability to fit in with the dominant style of dress in the workplace. Despite feeling a tension of not fitting into their workplace environment, colleagues noted that the shift in working life and (sometimes) geographical relocation for work also made it very difficult to fit into their previous home environment, often rendering them as feeling like "class traitors" to their roots.

This paper highlights themes around class that ask larger conceptual questions about the social mobility agenda that is currently actively pursued both by large organizations in the U.K. as well as voices across the rest of the world. As this thesis shows, historical ap-

proaches to social mobility and class integration in the higher education sector can be called into question on two fronts. Firstly, there is the concern that while working-class individuals might be able to access an institution or organization, they never fully "integrate" and always feel a sense of flux between their origins and their new working environments. This raises significant questions about well-being. Furthermore, the idea of social mobility and the integration of people from working-class backgrounds is predicated on the prioritization of the kind of cultural tastes and behaviors that are already in practice within that institution. In the case of large city-based firms and organizations, and in "elite" universities, this set of cultural tastes and behaviors have been put into place by decades, and sometimes centuries, of institutions being dominated by members of the upper and upper middle classes. As such, current social mobility initiatives in the higher education sector advocate for the adoption of these kinds of cultural tastes and dispositions in opposition to the cultures and tastes of the working class.

Including the lived experiences of people who exist at the periphery of the normative, traditional image of elite higher education is a vital step to ensuring that inclusivity is embedded in practice rather than performative. By including the perspectives of all those who interact with our higher education institutions both nationally and internationally we allow a complete body of evidence to become established, and to develop. Such evidence is critical in creating the inclusive, transformative, progressive higher education institutions of the future, where diversity, diverse experiences, and diversity of thought is prioritized as indispensable.

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